



DEMON LORD 2099

CYBERPUNK CITY SHINJUKU

1 DAIGO MURASAKI
Illustration by **KURETA**





DEMON LORD 2099

1. CYBERPUNK CITY SHINJUKU

DAIGO MURASAKI Illustration by KURETA



“I think
it’s time
to shake
those foolish
mortals
to the core...
Make them
well aware
of my
triumphant
return.”

**Demon Lord
Veltol**

The legendary Demon Lord, ruler of the former Immortal Kingdom. Five hundred years after his defeat at the hands of the Hero, he’s returned—in the year 2099 FE—to the Cyberpunk City of Shinjuku.

**Duchess of the
Dazzling Blaze
Machina**

One of the Six Dark Peers, she specializes in flame magic. Swore loyalty to Veltol, who has great trust in her. Responsible for resurrecting the Demon Lord.

“L-Lord
Veltol?”

DEMON LORD x CYBERPUNK

CYBERPUNK CITY

THE DEMON LORD IN THE NEW AGE

CYBERPUNK CITY

“Good
evemortal!
How’s the
pain of life
treating you
mortals today?
It is I, the
Demon Lord
Veltol Velvet
Velsvalt.”

“I just know Velly’s
got what it takes
to shine brighter
than a diamond.
Leave this to me;
with his talents,
we’ll have results
in three months.”

**Aether Hacker
Takahashi**
Regularly undertakes
illegal endeavors.
Also goes by the handle
Bunny Bones. Capable of
hacking giant holographic
displays and analyzing
drone footage, among
other talents.





“You betrayed the immortals! Your slight against us is far too heavy a crime!”

“Your era is long gone, Veltol! It’s time I put you out of your misery, you fossil of a demon lord!”

**Duke of the Bloody Arts
Marcus**

One of the Six Dark Peers, he specializes in blood-related magic. Currently, director of the megacorporation Ishimaru Heavy Magical Industries (IHMI). Formerly in charge of magitech development under Veltol's command.

A DEMON LORD'S DUTY

CYBERPUNK CITY

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FANTASION

The catastrophe that merged two interdimensional worlds: Earth, the planet of industrial civilization, and Alnaeth, the planet of magical civilization. The realms of science and fantasy fused, and Earth's technology combined with Alnaeth's magitech to create what is now called magineering. This paradigm shift accelerated the development of civilization, albeit in a warped, twisted fashion.

CYBERPUNK CITY SHINJUKU

One of the city-states formed after the Fantasion and among the biggest and most populous cities in the world. The aether reactor at its core supplies the mana and electricity required for the city to function. The elevated loop line separates Shinjuku into two zones: Inner Shinjuku with its bright lights, towering skyscrapers, and shopping centers, and Outer Shinjuku with its slums and abandoned factories.

DEMON LORD 2099

A graphic of white circuit lines and nodes on a black background, positioned to the right of the word 'DEMON'.

CYBERPUNK CITY SHINJUKU

1

Daigo Murasaki

Illustration by **Kureta**


New York

The logo for Yen On, featuring the word 'YEN' in a small font above a stylized 'ON' where the 'O' is a circle with a horizontal line through it.

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DEMON LORD 2099

1. CYBERPUNK CITY SHINJUKU

DAIGO MURASAKI

Translation by Sergio Avila

Cover art by Kureta

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Just as a hungry dragon cares not for the life of the meat it devours, those blessed by the promising developments of civilization do not concern themselves with the corpses upon which their society was constructed.

—Marcus Dolkrait, from his book *My Ascension*

PROLOGUE

A Fantasy of Sword and Sorcery

Month of the Dragon, Day 12, 1599 CE (Continental Era). The throne chamber of the subterranean Demon Castle's inverted keep.

With a flash, one of Alnaeth's stories came to an end.

And what a majestic end it was.

The slash of the Hero's silver sword had turned into a beam of light that sliced through the air, rent the aether, exterminated evil—and cut down the Demon Lord.

The fight for survival between humans and darklings; the struggle for power between mortals and immortals; the final battle between Hero and Demon Lord—this event, known as the Immortal War, saw victory for the mortal army and its leader, the Hero.

The throne chamber—the site of said battle—was now shrouded in silence.

Its sinister yet sublime pillars were broken, the crimson carpet torn at the seams, and the throne itself demolished to pieces.

Two shadows stood facing each other.

On one side: a young blond-haired, blue-eyed human clad in silver armor and an azure cloak, the effulgent Holy Sword, Ixasorde, in his hands. His eyes were even more incandescent than the weapon itself.

On the other side: a fantastical creature of enormous stature, two crooked horns jutting from his draconic skull. In his hands was a single-edged sword the same color as his mantle, so black it appeared to be nighttime itself: the Dark Sword, Vernal. One of his piercing horns was now broken in half, and his skull sported a massive stab wound with many fissures running from it.

The creature opened its maw and made the aether tremble with three simple

words:

“Excellent work, Hero.”

His solemn, bowel-shaking voice echoed through the chamber.

The Demon Lord then let his Dark Sword fall; it turned into a black mist.

His body, cut in two by the Hero’s fatal slash, began crumbling like dry leaves until all that remained was a man with long black hair and a mantle the color of darkness. He immediately fell to his knees.

This was the Demon Lord’s true form.

“Well done... You have finally defeated me, Hero. I commend your strength and, most of all, your courage.”

The Demon Lord’s praise was sincere, from the bottom of his heart.

“I...see.” The Hero closed his eyes as if to process what he’d just been told. “You were strong as well... Truly, you were...”

“...”

The Demon Lord responded with silence.

They were fated adversaries, archenemies, nemeses who detested each other. Each stood opposed to the other’s sense of justice. And yet now, with the battle over, their minds were clear. They were past such emotions as anger and hatred.

“Why did I lose?” the Demon Lord asked the Hero. “How did you defeat me? Why...did you prevail...?”

He was an immortal darkling. No matter how many times his extremities were ripped from his body, they would soon regenerate. Crushing his heart or head did not kill him, for he contradicted life itself.

So long as his soul existed, he would continue conquering death. Now, however, he was reaching his end.

The constant damage from the Holy Sword had sapped his soul dry. His flesh wasn’t dying, but rather, his soul was perishing.

He could scarcely move. The last vestiges of his soul waned. There was no

stopping his fate; he would soon become mere ash.

“Strategy, numbers, even my own strength... I was far superior to you puny mortals in every respect,” said the Demon Lord. “I couldn’t possibly lose... And yet lose I did. Victory is yours. Tell me, Hero. Tell me why that is.”

The Hero answered: “...It’s life.”

“What...?”

“We have life. We may seem puny to your kind, our lives all too short and fleeting. Perhaps it’s true that you, with endless life, are superior to us mortals.” The Hero paused for a brief moment. “But that’s why we do everything in our power to live these puny lives to their fullest extent. Our weakness drives us to be strong. That’s why I... That’s why we were able to defeat you. Because we can see the value in life’s little glimmers. That much is certain.”

“...Enough of your jokes. As if such nonsense could ever defeat—”

“It’s not a joke.”

“Life’s little glimmers...? You expect me to believe such garbage?”

The immortal being, for all his impermanence, was uncomprehending. Perhaps he might have understood ages ago what the Hero meant, but he had long since forgotten.

“You don’t have to. We’ve won. And I believe our victory is evidence enough of this light we humans have.”

“.....Do not forget, Hero: Where there is light among humans, there is also darkness. And so long as that darkness exists, I will appear time and time again before such light, for I am not the Immortal King but the Invincible King.”

“Then I’ll face that darkness as many times as needed.” The Hero’s eyes were unwavering, glowing with hope.

“Farewell, my greatest sworn enemy...Hero Gram.”

“Farewell, my most hated foe...Demon Lord Veltol.”

The Hero lifted the Holy Sword, then brought it down on the Demon Lord Veltol’s head.

The faint gleam in the Demon Lord's eyes disappeared. His body crumbled into black sand before vanishing into nothingness.

The Hero watched carefully, so as to burn the image into his mind.

"...Time to go home. Everyone's waiting."

He used the sword to pull himself up, then set off for a new day—one brimming with hope.

The end.

Yet the world lives on.

CHAPTER ONE

Cyberpunk City—Shinjuku

And so, five hundred years went by.

It was the quickening of new beginnings, followed by newborn cries.

The moment of resurrection had arrived.

Rebirth felt like rising to the water's surface. His consciousness floated up from the murky depths, and after five hundred long years, he was revived.

Veltol Velvet Velsvalt: the Immortal King, the Dark Lord, the Invincible One. He had many names, all symbolizing the absolute, terrifying evil he represented to the mortals.

And there was one particular title he was called most often: Demon Lord.

Five hundred years earlier, he had created the Immortal Kingdom, formed the Immortal Army, and battled against the mortals in a struggle to dominate the world, only to be defeated at the hands of the Hero.

His body had crumbled to dust and returned to the darkness. And yet, after several centuries had passed, he was back.

His return had only been possible through the power of Methenoel, a type of reincarnation magic Veltol himself had created to tie his memories and physical form together with his soul, then convert that into data and send it to the future. The aether used that data to emulate his body and rebuild it.

Aether was the greatest form of matter, capable of imitating any phenomenon, and magic was the method through which one could manipulate the aether to bend the world's logic.

There was nothing, theoretically, that couldn't be achieved through magic. Resurrection, time travel, universe creation... No matter how preposterous or absurd, as long as one possessed the required mana—magical power, that is—

and knew the correct technic, anything was possible.

Among these possibilities was reincarnation. It had existed in theory only with no history of success—until Veltol perfected the forbidden art.

Veltol was a darkling—all immortal beings without exception. Immortals were, naturally, beyond the concept of death.

However, even souls became worn and weathered. No matter how undying the flesh may be, souls were not indestructible. A soul would eventually perish once all of its power had been exhausted.

The purpose of Methenoel was to conquer that destruction. It was a cosmic endeavor to revive body and soul even after both had rotted and perished.

Veltol had evolved. The completion of this magic had elevated his soul from a mere immortal to a higher being. He had become truly invincible.

And now, five hundred years later, he would once again envelop the world in darkness. His rebirth would bring him world domination.

So...it succeeded?

Veltol was still trying to wrap his head around his second life, his thoughts as sluggish as one would have when waking from a deep slumber.

It was, of course, the first time he'd ever used Methenoel. Although he had figured out the logic and completed the technic, he'd had no opportunity to test it out.

Veltol was not reborn as the fantastical creature that the Hero had faced but the human form that had crumbled to dust following his defeat.

His long jet-black hair, captivating as a crow's damp feathers, contrasted with his snowy-white skin. He was perfectly androgynous, possessing equal parts delicate feminine beauty and masculine virility. His eyes were the color of darkness. His limbs were long and slender, his body utterly proportionate: lean and toned, yet covered in muscles hard as steel. His almost artistic physique was completely exposed, not a single stitch of clothing on him.

He looked just like a human. He didn't have fangs like an orc, or pointed ears like an elf, or horns like an ogre.

And this much was natural, since Veltol had originally been human.

Immortals were supernatural beings separate from gods or living creatures. Mortals called them darklings out of fear, for such beings were human yet undying, human in appearance but wielding inhuman powers. In fact, all immortals were considered darklings, be they human or elf or orc or otherwise.

Veltol looked like a human in his early twenties when in fact he was one of the oldest darklings at more than three thousand years old.

Where am I...?

He was lying on an altar made of white rock. His vision was blurry, and he was having a hard time grasping the situation—perhaps an aftereffect of Methenoel.

He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with cold air and aether. The aether coursed through his veins all the way to his heart before transforming into mana. The mana then traveled to every one of his veins, his nerves—every cell in his body.

Mana, besides being fuel for magic, was an indispensable element for life.

Once his eyes were full of mana, his vision returned. He could see he was in a vast, dark space.

“Lord Veltol...”

He heard a voice, one that he knew all too well. It was clean and clear like a chime. Even after five hundred years of sleep, there was no way he could forget or mistake it.

“Machina?”

He turned around to find a girl on her knees.

She was lovely and ephemeral like freshly fallen snow. Her skin was almost transparent, her long hair silver, and her eyes a light crimson. Her face, respectfully looking downward, as well as her petite frame would perhaps be better described as cute rather than beautiful, yet the charming allure that seemed to ooze from her pores belied her girlish appearance.

She looked almost exactly like a human, but she was in fact an ignia.

“Yes, sir. It is I, Machina Soleige, Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze, one of the Six Dark Peers. I have been waiting for this moment long enough for a dragon to lose all of its scales.”

The Six Dark Peers were a group of powerful darkling aristocrats appointed by the Demon Lord Veltol. Machina was a particularly essential subject among them.

She looked slightly younger than Veltol, but she, too, was an immortal darkling. She was over a thousand years old.

“Please excuse me for receiving you in such crude attire, my lord.”

She wasn’t wearing her usual magnificently red formal armor but a thick white coat and hat.

Both her outfit and the situation were unnatural. The realization of Methenoel—the rebirth of the Demon Lord—should be a grand ceremony for all the Immortal Kingdom to celebrate. Machina should’ve been wearing ceremonial robes, and the entire country should’ve been present to receive Veltol.

And yet, Machina was the only one there in that bare, lightless place. What had happened?

Veltol didn’t reproach her for her unseemly attire. He had absolute trust in her loyalty. There had to be a logical reason why she was dressed the way she was.

“No matter. You saw to my revival and completion of Methenoel, and for that, I commend you.”

“Such is my duty as your vassal, Lord Veltol. Your praise is wasted on me.”

There were a few requirements for restoring a soul via Methenoel. There had to be a caster to activate it at the proper place and time. Methenoel, a ritual spell, couldn’t be performed alone. One person had to cast it on their soul while another resurrected that soul.

Veltol sat up.

“So where are we? Is this underground altar in Readelm?” he asked while

getting down from the altar made of skullia. With a wave of his arm, aether covered his naked body in black armor and a cloak of the same color.

“No, Lord Veltol. We are in the underground cathedral of Nelldor’s dungeon, below the former Shinjuku Station.”

“Shin...juku...?” he repeated, confused at the unfamiliar word.

Veltol was familiar with the underground cathedral of Nelldor. It was built on an island to the far east of Alnaeth for the purpose of worshipping the Demon Lord and receiving him in his eventual rebirth. The word *Shinjuku*, however, was new to Veltol.

“Well, in any case...”

He paid no further attention to the little details. Five hundred years had passed, so it would be perfectly natural for the name of the place to have changed. Veltol had no need to cling to such changes to realize his objective.

“The Demon Lord has returned, Machina. Let us conquer the world once more!”

World domination: his mission and ambition, and the immortals’ dearest wish.

“Beg pardon, Lord Veltol...,” Machina interjected timidly. “If I may...”

“What is it?”

Machina was struggling to say her piece. After a moment’s hesitation, she got herself together and looked right into Veltol’s eyes as she told him:

“The world we were trying to conquer...has already perished.”



“It happened around eighty years ago,” Machina began as she and Veltol walked through the dungeon’s passageways. “Our world—Alnaeth, the planet of magical civilization—experienced an unprecedented disaster when it came into contact with another world: Earth, the planet of industrial civilization.”

Earth, January 2023.

Alnaeth, Month of the Behemoth 2023 CE.

Oddly enough, both planets' calendars happened to align when their worlds merged across dimensions—nay, across universes.

“They...merged?” said Veltol.

“Yes. Earth's scientists named this catastrophe the Fantasion.”

“Fantasion...”

The Fantasion, naturally, caused a variety of problems.

The planets and their respective worlds fused into one, causing large-scale changes on a geological, celestial, and climatological level. In just three years, the aggregate population of Earth and Alnaeth dropped to one tenth of its former number.

And then came the clash between species.

Earth had only one ruling species—Earthoid humans—while Alnaeth was home to a plethora of species besides their native Alnaethoid humans: elves, orcs, therians, ogres, goblins, dwarves, among others, each with their own territories.

Both Earth and Alnaeth had internal conflict by the way of race, religion, and politics, but Alnaeth had interspecies conflict in addition.

“These otherworlders had not only different cultures and languages but strikingly different appearances as well,” said Machina. “And from their point of view, we had appeared out of nowhere in their territory...”

“So conflict was inevitable.”

“Indeed...” Machina nodded.

Existing infrastructure was destroyed, followed by food shortages, epidemics, territorial and residency disputes, technological disparities, and finally, discrimination among species. Problems piled on top of one another, and it wasn't long until war broke out.

The Fantasion mayhem mixed species and territories up, rendering any previous national borders meaningless. Countries became defunct, and it was only a matter of time before cities started acting as their own autonomous nations.

Conflict arose between cities, and over a total of forty years, two massive City Wars took place.

“It’s been just over two decades since City War II ended. Those scars are finally starting to heal... And that brings us to the current state of the world. In Alnaeth terms, we are in the former underground cathedral of Nelldor in the Myrd archipelago, which also corresponds to the former special ward of Shinjuku in Tokyo,” Machina explained as she guided the Demon Lord through the dungeon.

Veltol couldn’t understand all of it. Or rather, he couldn’t believe it. It was too sudden and bizarre, and it felt more like he was hearing a fairy tale. His incredulity kept him from noticing the rusted ticket gates and machines they’d passed.

“The world you’d known has perished, Lord Veltol. A new one was built in its place.”

They were in an amalgamation of what was once Shinjuku Station and the underground cathedral of Nelldor’s dungeon. The old train station had transformed into a full-fledged labyrinth.

The broken escalators extended for over fifty meters. Machina and Veltol made their way to the top—the labyrinth’s exit.

“It is now year 2099 of the Fused Era.”

The heavy metal door before them was closed.

“This is the new world.”

Light flooded in when Machina opened the door, making Veltol squint.

And that’s when he saw the world.

The landscape far exceeded his imagination.

It was overwhelming.

Aether neon lights so vivid it made his eyes hurt.

Lights from the buildings’ windows.

Lights from the gigantic hologram displays covering the buildings.

Lights from the red lanterns hanging from the buildings' eaves.

The glow of taillights from the land vehicles racing through the streets.

Lights indicating the positions of the drones and flying vehicles soaring through the sky.

Lights, lights, endless lights...

It was night, and yet it looked as if the stars had fallen to the planet's surface, their dazzling lights ridding the world of any darkness.

Veltol couldn't take it all in. It was exceedingly more luminous than the Immortal Royal Capital or the Imperial Capital Astrica's castle town. This was the light of a city that never sleeps.

The chilly, somber sky was far off in the distance. Thick, black clouds obscured the darkness of night as polluted snow fell on the city, illuminated by the vivid hues of the lights yet sparse enough not to sound alarms from the nearby speakers.

"Wha—?"

Veltol's eyes and mouth were equally agape as he took in the sights, incredulous.

From the city's center rose a giant pillar 243 meters tall—the aether reactor. It drew aether from the underground aether lines, converting it into mana and electricity for the city's consumption as well as the cryotolerance zone that protected Shinjuku from the cold. The barrier wasn't perfect, however, as there were still spots throughout the city that reached subzero temperatures even during daytime. Just one step outside the zone was uninhabitable.

Surrounding the aether reactor were brand-new limestone buildings of slim neo-elvish architecture, intermingled with squat structures made from reinforced concrete. The latter were clearly made on the cheap; there was no sign that a single thought went into their structural integrity. Unfettered expansion led to an increase in vertical construction of slipshod steel frames stacked one on top of the other. The resulting homes were no sturdier than tofu, all grouped together in clusters like tombstones.



The city was a forest, and power poles were its trees, cables stretching everywhere like a giant spiderweb. Humans, elves, goblins, and many other species spoke a hotchpotch of languages—elvish, Japanese, English, Chinese, dwarvish, orcish—as they walked the streets beneath swarms of surveillance drones.

“What—”

Aether neon signs in various languages jutted out from shoddily constructed buildings, their surfaces crisscrossed with steaming pipes and gutters reminiscent of veins.

The streets were littered with all manner of trash: old flyers, cigarette butts, empty cans, bottles of moonshine. Below a poster reading PUT A STOP TO HOMELESSNESS! PEOPLE ARE FREEZING TO DEATH ON THE STREETS! in elvish, the common tongue, lay a street urchin wrapped in filthy rags—it was difficult to tell whether the person was alive or dead.

All of this was decidedly different from the culture of any country Veltol knew.

“—the hell is thiiiiissssss?!”

The Demon Lord screamed to the sky in astonishment.

This was the Cyberpunk City of Shinjuku. One of the biggest cities in the world, with a population of over three million people.

Veltol was on Kabukicho Street, the main drag through Shinjuku’s southern end and the city’s biggest shopping district.

Civilization had advanced too much over these past five centuries.

Throngs of people and ground vehicles navigated the streets, while flying vehicles and surveillance and delivery drones crowded the skies.

The Demon Lord was aghast at the fantastical landscape.

“This is how much that little island to the east has prospered...,” he murmured.

The Japanese archipelago that Veltol knew—the Myrd archipelago, that is—

had been undeveloped land, used only as a destination for exile. Criminals there lived in caves, and that primitive state was the last he knew about it.

“The country located in Earth’s version of this archipelago was already highly developed. A paradigm shift occurred after Earth’s advanced scientific technology and Alnaeth’s magitech became intertwined, and development skyrocketed.”

“The mortals’ civilization is this advanced and yet the gods haven’t taken matters into their own hands...?”

“The gods are dead.”

The catastrophic planetary fusion affected more than just humankind. There were new denizens from a different world, an influx of unfamiliar religions. People’s values changed; various apocalyptic philosophies took root; morals and ethics were turned on their head. All of this cheapened the divine and debilitated faith.

The gods fell to degradation.

“Existing civilizations regressed heavily right after the Fantasion, which led many scholars to believe that had been the gods’ last show of wrath.”

“I see... So the world has really ended...”

Veltol’s words were tinged with sorrow.

His fight in the olden Alnaeth was not only a struggle against the mortals but against the fate the gods had created, too. And it had ended without him even knowing. He cast his gaze downward.

The people walking the streets looked absolutely bizarre to him.

“I see many people here have arms and legs that are rather...inorganic.”

Their extremities appeared to be made of steel or some mysterious black material.

“Indeed, they are using artificial limbs,” said Machina.

“Artificial...? Are they really? They’re quite lifelike.”

Prostheses existed even back during Veltol’s time but in much simpler and

cruder forms, mostly just pieces of wood or bone sculpted to resemble the intended limb.

“Those are called magiprotheses. They use a metal armature for the bone, which is covered in artificial muscle made of synthetic mithril fiber. Aether is used to simulate the nerves, so these work exactly as real arms or legs when connected to the body.”

“This many, though? Is it because of the wars?”

“The wars have something to do with it, but I believe the main reason is most jobs around here involve physical labor.”

“So accidents are common?”

“That’s another part of it, but it’s mostly because of frostbite. Many of these people work outside the barrier, and it’s truly freezing out there...”

The city’s climate was certainly cold enough even for Veltol.

Even within the cryotolerance zone, you needed enough protection from the cold if you didn’t want your fingers, ears, and nose hurting. A regular person would surely freeze to death just staying put for a few hours.

“By the way, they call people with magiprotheses magiborgs, although some consider the term discriminatory as of late.”

“Hmm... And what about them?”

Here and there were folks wearing some sort of bucket-like metal tubes or helmets on their heads. Their bodies underneath their clothes were similarly metallic.

“Those are full-borgs, people who supplement their bodily functions with machines. It’s a sort of full-body version of the magiprotheses.”

“...Wait, wait, wait. Supplement their bodily functions? You mean their organs, too?”

“Correct. People who replace everything but their brains and spines are not uncommon.”

The machines Veltol knew of were much simpler and more primitive. It was

easy for him to imagine how artificial limbs worked, but he couldn't fathom how an artificial organ was even possible.

"There are also automata, which look just like humans. They've been getting quite advanced lately, so much so it's hard to tell them apart from the real thing."

Veltol also noticed that everyone had a piece of metal affixed to their nape. Machina had one as well, although Veltol couldn't see it since it was hidden beneath her hood and long hair.

He wondered if that, too, was some sort of prosthesis as he stood dumbfounded, watching the pedestrians coming and going. He was so wrapped up in thought that he was too slow to notice someone walking right his way.

"Ah, Lord Veltol, you'll—!"

"Tsk! Don't just stand there blocking the way, asshole!"

The big ogre with an artificial arm clicked his tongue as he bumped into Machina, who had stepped in front of Veltol.

"Sorry, I had something on my mind. Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes, I'm fine. Forgive me..."

"Honestly, does that oaf not realize he just bumped into one of the Six Dark Peers?"

Veltol looked up at the thick clouds covering the night sky.

"..."

Then he smirked.

"Is something the matter?" Machina asked.

"I think it's time to shake those foolish mortals to the core... Make them well aware of my triumphant return."

"L-Lord Veltol?"

Machina knew very well he only made that expression when he was about to do something ludicrous.

“Hah!”

Veltol’s internal mana initialized and constructed a technic that expanded into a large, elaborate magic circle.

“*Ell Stunna!*”

As soon as he said those words, a pillar of light emerged from the circle, piercing the thick clouds and opening a big hole in the sky. Moonlight and starlight shone over Shinjuku for the first time in fifteen months.

Veltol had performed a method of aether-based phenomena modification. In other words, magic.

Magic involved the *initialization* of one’s internal mana followed by the *construction* of a technic using a spell. Next came the technic’s *expansion* in the form of a magic circle, then the *incantation*—reading the spell aloud—and finally, the *proclamation* of the maginom, or the magic’s name.

Those were the five processes needed for magic.

The Elderish spell names belonged to ultimate magic used by rulers since ancient times to demonstrate their royal might.

And Veltol didn’t need one of the five processes—the incantation.

Not even a demon lord should have been capable of skipping the steps necessary for magic activation. But Veltol, with his enormous mana capacity, natural affinity for magic, and ultra-high-speed magical processing output, was able to compress the most time-consuming step into the next one. The result: a quasi-omission of the incantation process.

That was what made the Demon Lord the Demon Lord. His forbidden secret technique: chantless magic.

“...Hmmm?”

Veltol looked up at the sky and squinted in dissatisfaction at the light shining through.

“I’ve gotten far too weak.”

The ultimate magic manipulated the weather on a scale big enough to get rid

of all the clouds in the area, yet as he was now, he could barely open a hole in one of them.

“Is that...?”

Veltol looked through the hole at the dark red star shining beside the moon. It symbolized a bad omen in ancient Alnaeth.

“It seems I am not welcome in this world.”

The star shone mysteriously, sinisterly.

“Wh-what the hell?!”

“The sky...”

“Who’s stupid enough to manipulate weather with magic these days?”

Right then...

...a shrill siren went off.

Veltol’s magic had tripped the sensors that picked up anomalies in nearby mana. The commotion started spreading even farther.

“What’s that racket? It’s ruining my triumphant return. Has the concept of respect vanished while I was gone?”

“Oh no! You can’t use ultimate magic inside the city!” Machina flailed her arms in dismay. “The City Guard will come! Let’s get out of here!”

She grabbed Veltol’s arm and dragged him away.

“Wait, Machina, why should I be the one to flee?”

“Please! I insist!”

Veltol shook off his growing concerns and allowed Machina to lead him down the main drag through the throngs of people.

That was when he spotted it—something impossible in the crowds. A hooded man was approaching, his face momentarily visible when the wind lifted his hood ever so slightly.

“Huh?!”

Veltol couldn’t help but stop and look back as the man passed by, but he had

already vanished into the crowds.

“Is something the matter?” Machina asked, puzzled as to why Veltol had stopped.

“No, it’s nothing,” he answered, shaking his head.

There was no way that man could be here in this world after five centuries.

Veltol tried to convince himself of it. He squeezed his hand, open and shut, to rid himself of the reluctant sensation—and to gauge his own power.

“Hmmm... My mana has certainly weakened greatly compared to five hundred years ago, in terms of both output and capacity. Beyond that, my body itself doesn’t feel up to my standards, either. It feels as if I’ve entered the battlefield without any armor, though it pains me to admit.”

“It must be because faith in you has plummeted, Lord Veltol...”

“Yes, I sensed that as well. I’m no stronger than an average human. My power as an immortal is also weakened. It seems hardly anyone in this current era knows who I am.”

Faith was what higher incorporeal beings, such as gods, needed to intervene with the material world. This power was derived from the thoughts or emotions an individual conjured from the masses; the stronger these emotions were, the more power they provided.

There were two kinds of faith: positive and negative. Negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and fear fueled lower incorporeal beings such as demons. Despite their opposite aims, both kinds of faith were based on a third party’s observations and feelings toward a subject.

Veltol, having elevated his soul while retaining a corporeal body, was in between god and demon, so he was strengthened by both positive and negative faith.

Five hundred years earlier, during his reign as Demon Lord, he received positive faith from the immortals and their brethren who adored him; the mortals who spread his infamy and terror throughout the world provided him with negative faith. He had achieved the kind of power that gods could only

dream of.

“Even elves live a mere three hundred years, so those who were infants during your reign have long since died,” said Machina. “You are only talked about as part of history, my lord. Even the gods are starting to be forgotten.”

The opposite of faith was oblivion—or even apathy.

Faith was determined by how many people recognized and had feelings toward an individual. A loss of recognition translated to a massive power deficit.

That was the root cause of Veltol’s weakened state. With five hundred years gone, he was just as forgotten as the gods.

“It is what it is,” he said. “In any case, I now have eternal life—it’s only a matter of gradually reclaiming my faith. Now, Machina, what are the other Six Dark Peers and nobles up to? What about the Demon Lord Army?”

As he asked, he looked toward the entrance of a narrow alleyway at one end of the street. He saw an ogre, an orc, and a therian engaged in a fistfight around a steel drum, lit up as a bonfire.

“From what I can tell, it seems members of the Blood Alliance coexist in peace,” he continued. “What happened with the treaty?”

The Blood Alliance was a treaty the Demon Lord Army formed with the orcs, ogres, and therians. The purpose was to give favorable treatment to these three species so that they could prosper together.

Of course, this was only a temporary pact born from aligned interests. Both the immortals and the three species had planned to kill the other in their proverbial sleep.

The mortals greatly outnumbered their immortal counterparts, and the Blood Alliance was formed in order to bridge that gap.

“The Alliance was disbanded after our army’s defeat. The leaders died during the Three Blades Revolution in 1616 CE, and the remaining populace submitted to the mortals,” said Machina.

“I see.”

“The species allied with our army suffered awful treatment. I heard they were

forced into brutal slave labor. Discrimination is still very pervasive to this day, just not as explicit as it once was.”

“Mm, I expected as much.”

A common trait between all three species of the Blood Alliance was that none possessed a great aptitude for magic. The reasons were manifold: orc, ogre, and therian mana stores were small and their magitech crude, a byproduct of their paltry education standards. As a result, the other mortals always looked down on them. Furthermore, these three species were sturdier and tougher than the rest, which stoked fear and a sense of inferiority in other mortals. Those feelings only served as further proof among mortals that magic was greater than physical prowess.

That’s why Veltol welcomed the orcs, ogres, and therians into the Blood Alliance. He could easily imagine that they would end up subject to other mortals if he was defeated and the Alliance was disbanded.

“The Immortal Kingdom agreed to a ceasefire with the mortals,” Machina explained. “The Six Dark Peers assembled under Ralsheen of the Blue Storm and decided to wait in hiding until you were to be revived. And just when there were less than a hundred years left before your resurrection, the Fantasion destroyed the world as we knew it. We were also greatly affected by the disaster—the Immortal Kingdom’s citizens went their separate ways to various cities. Then one year after the First City War, several corporations started leading a massive city-wide movement.”

“What kind of movement?”

Machina held her tongue for a moment. Her trembling lips signaled it was hard for her to say it.

Finally, she squeezed the words out:

“...The Immortal Hunt.”

“Immortal Hunt...?”

“Its purpose was to annihilate or imprison all of the immortals scattered worldwide. A number of immortals produced various military achievements during the First City War; our kind doesn’t die and tends to be very experienced

in battle, so between the Earthoids who didn't know of our existence and the Alnaethoids who had largely forgotten about the threat we could present, our wartime achievements came as an enormous shock. During the interwar period, darklings were considered an inhuman evil to be exterminated."

That was also the common preconception five hundred years prior, and even back in ancient Alnaeth. Darklings, being immortal, were feared by the mortals as monsters because of their extraordinary power.

"We resisted as much as we could, but advances in magineering led to the mass production of anti-immortal weapons. Once those became increasingly commonplace, the mortals grew overwhelmingly powerful, and we were defeated."

"What...happened to the Six Dark Peers?"

"They were...annihilated...," Machina replied morosely. "I don't know where May of the Mournful Firmament, Sihlwald of the Black Dragon, or Ralsheen of the Blue Storm are. I'm not sure if they were killed, or if they're captive somewhere, or if they're still in hiding. I haven't been able to confirm whether they survived the Immortal Hunt. As for Zenol, Duke of the Karmic Sword, since only Ralsheen and I knew how to activate Methenoel, Zenol acted as a decoy so that I could escape imprisonment...and he alone stayed in the enemy camp..."

May, Sihlwald, Ralsheen, Zenol... All of them were Veltol's vassals, immortals who had served him for a long time.

He had thought the sadness of losing someone was something he'd left in the past. That his ability to think fondly of someone had died long ago. And yet now, the loss and emptiness felt insurmountable.

"But the Immortal Hunt is now a thing of the past. Fear of immortals has been diminishing since the City Wars ended, so there's no need to be as wary these days. It used to be so much worse—there was a lot of betrayal, and some mortals were even arbitrarily labeled as immortals..."

"The Immortal Hunt, huh...?"

Then Veltol realized there was one person Machina hadn't talked about. The Six Dark Peers were, naturally, six darklings. The four Machina mentioned plus

herself amounted to only five.

“What about Marcus?”

Marcus, Duke of the Bloody Arts.

He and Ralsheen assisted Veltol in political matters. A dark elf, Marcus also oversaw the Immortal Kingdom’s magitech research.

“...U-um...L-Lord Marcus...is...”

Machina looked away and started twiddling her thumbs. It was very clear she was hiding something, but before Veltol could get a word in, Machina shouted:

“I-in any case, Lord Veltol! Aren’t you thirsty?!”

“Huh? No, not rea—”

“The city air may be harmless, but it is much too filthy for you, sir! So! I’ll go get you a beverage to moisten your noble throat! Please wait right here for a moment!”

“W-wait a second, Machina...”

Machina cut the conversation short and scurried off into the crowds.

Veltol couldn’t tell if there was something wrong with Marcus or if Machina simply didn’t want to talk about it, but he knew she wouldn’t to lie to him. Seeing her change the subject indicated that she would rather not say anything than lie, something he felt came from her sense of loyalty.

“*Sigh.* What am I to do with her?” Veltol muttered. “Machina hasn’t changed a bit in five hundred years.”

He felt relieved that at least she had stayed constant in this world so sweepingly changed.

Veltol stood beneath a streetlight and eyed his surroundings. He could hear people talking and even shop barkers hawking their wares.

To the main drag’s north was the ever-visible landmark: the aether reactor.

A holographic display that covered one side of a building was playing an ad for a flying vehicle. The music was loud but catchy.

“Become one with the wind and leave time in your dust. Always there to enrich your life, IHMI presents the winner of the Shinjuku FVotY award: the Vagen 07.”

The screen showed the hottest virtual idol trio’s adorable avatars riding the flying vehicle into a tunnel full of psychedelic lights.

“Huh... So it’s the same principle as image projection...? But something so large and detailed... Surely it must be a waste of mana...?”

Veltol watched agape, when a black-and-white police cruiser—the words *Shinjuku Police* written in Japanese on it—passed by, sirens blaring and red lights shining.

“Hmm...?”

Then he looked around. He sensed a slight distortion in the aether.

It was a variation small enough that a normal person wouldn’t notice. Even with his reduced power, the Demon Lord’s aether sensitivity hadn’t lost its edge.

He turned to see a girl with a strange outfit—although as far as he was concerned, everyone was wearing strange outfits.

Her black hair was cut short, and a tuft of her bangs was dyed red. She was wearing a red qipao with golden embroidery and a short-sleeved dwarven jacket along with a pair of comfortable-looking shoes. On her head sat a pair of round sunglasses.

Her black hair, brown eyes, rounded ears, and peachy skin were characteristic of humans from the East. She looked to be around seventeen or eighteen years old. Her graceful features, strong eyes, and general poise gave her an energetic aura.

The girl was leaning against an iron fence and staring straight at the ad playing on the holographic display.

The corners of her mouth lifted into a smile.

Suddenly, the screen went black. A funky logo of a bunny’s skull appeared for a split second before the screen turned black again. Then it started playing

something entirely different from before: an ad for a pornographic video site.

“Ahn! Mmm! Ah! Ahhh!”

Sensual moans echoed throughout the city at full volume accompanied by uncensored nudity.

Passersby couldn't help but stop and stare because of how sudden it had been.

“Whoa, what's up with that?”

“What's with the porn? Did the video bug out?”

“I think it got hacked.”

“Mommy, what are they doing?”

“Don't look!”

The crowds were astir.

Meanwhile, one person in particular wasn't watching the video but clapping and laughing at the resulting confusion: the girl Veltol had just glanced at.

He approached the girl as she grabbed her sides in laughter, then addressed her in elvish with a strong Elderish accent:

“Hey, lady.”

“Huh?” Her shoulders twitched, and she looked around.

“You, with the black hair.”

“M-me?”

“Indeed.”

She pointed at her face, and Veltol nodded magnanimously.

Her eyes darted back and forth as she asked, clearly very wary, “Wh-what is it?”

“What did you just do?” He crossed his arms and motioned to the screen with his chin.

“Huh? Wh-whatever could you mean? I have nooo idea what's going on! It's

probably just a bug or something.”

She put her hands behind her head, crossed her legs, and gazed into the distance whistling a dull tune.

“Do not utter such falsehoods in my presence. That video changed following an aether disturbance in your vicinity. You were the only one whose surrounding aether wavered, and the only one directing your attention to that screen. Of course you must have done something.”

The girl looked even more suspicious and shocked. “...You could tell I hacked it from an aether disturbance...? No way. Not even wizards can sense that much... What exactly are you?”

“Hmph. Is it not obvious? Ignorance is a sin, but I’ll forgive you. Today is a national holiday—the celebration of my rebirth.”

“Uh, pretty sure it’s just a regular weekday...”

“Therefore, I grant you pardon.”

“Okay, okay, whatever. Just tell me who you are,” she demanded, obviously very annoyed.

Veltol paid no attention to the way she glared at him. He raised his arms to the heavens, eyes closed, and announced:

“I am the Demon Lord.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“Surely you at least recognize my face.”

“Uh, nope...”

Veltol looked at her in disbelief, then immediately sighed and shrugged.

“So are you gonna report me to the City Guard?” the girl asked. “Save yourself the empty sense of justice. Those bastards won’t give you anything in return.”

“I’m not quite sure I follow, but rest assured I won’t hand you over to any sort of law enforcement.”

The girl seemed relieved to hear that. “Then what do you want?”

“What kind of magic was that just now? I can tell you used the aether to change the image projected on that screen, but I don’t understand the principle involved. You used a magical technique beyond my own comprehension, so you piqued my interest. You must be quite dexterous for me to be unable to discover how it works at first glance. And I can tell you’re confident in your skills by how you conduct yourself.”

The girl’s cheeks relaxed into a dopey smile, pleased by Veltol’s praise.

“Aw shucks, it’s not thaaat big a deal. I just did a li’l hacking!” she chirped.

“Hacking...?”

“Yep. Aether hacking. This may come as a surprise, but I’m actually an aether hacker, which means I’m always risking my life for my job. Anyway, those IHMI holodisplays are super common here in Shinjuku, and they all have a fatal security flaw in their technic’s logic barrier. I just took advantage of that to swap the video with some porn. The actual trick is real simple—what’s hard is finding that vulnerability in the system ’cause you’d basically need to be a genius like me, y’know? Oh, but don’t get me wrong, I didn’t just do it outta curiosity or boredom or as a prank or whatever. Thing is, IHMI’s always trying to censor the net or put filters on it, and me, I think the net’s the only truly free place out there, so IHMI’s basically my enemy. I mean, yeah, I do this stuff as part of, like, a bigger social protest. I’m pretty much the embodiment of punk, rebelling against this rotten society we live in.”

“I—I see...”

“Yep. So like I said, your average hacker wouldn’t find this weak spot, but this super genius hacker babe was able to spot and exploit it. Plus...”

The girl kept on rambling at full speed. Veltol was getting more and more confused, so he tried to interject, “Oh, by the way—”

“Then the technic fluctuation algorithm... What? I was just getting to the good part.”

Veltol had to make her stop, otherwise she would never shut up.

“Do you know of a man named Marcus?” he asked.

“Marcus?”

Considering the whole Immortal Hunt situation, Marcus could still be in hiding somewhere if he was alive. Not that Veltol had high hopes that this random girl he’d just met would know about the man.

Then, against all odds, he received an unexpected answer:

“Oh, you mean the director of IHMI? Yeah, I know about him.”

“What...?”

“Look over there.”

She pointed to a large limestone tower of neo-elvish architecture in the distance.

“That’s IHMI’s headquarters. You might find him there. I mean, he’s head of the company, so he’s a pretty famous guy.”



IHMI—Ishimaru Heavy Magical Industries.

Formerly Ishimaru Heavy Industries, the megacorporation IHMI started as an arms dealer during the City Wars before expanding at breakneck speed.

It was one of the biggest companies not only in Shinjuku but the entire world. Construction and administration of the aether reactor, the core of the city’s infrastructure, fell under IHMI’s jurisdiction. The company also excelled at magicalectronics and communications. It even had strong sway in the Shinjuku City Council. IHMI was the city’s de facto ruler.

“Technology is the spark of a new era” was its slogan, and its logo was based on a torch, displayed proudly on the second-tallest building in Shinjuku.

And Veltol was about to enter that very building.

He wanted to ask Marcus for help. Their world had been destroyed, the Immortal Kingdom had fallen, and Veltol’s own power had weakened—he needed a new direction.

It would be easy to decide a new objective if he had great social status, authority, and assets in this world. That’s why he needed Marcus.

Veltol arrived alone, without Machina. He'd kept this visit a secret from her since she seemed to be hiding something from him and would have very likely stopped him from even going.

The question is whether this is the Marcus I'm looking for. It's a bit of a puzzle how he managed to nab such a lofty position while this Immortal Hunt was going on.

The automatic double set of vertical and horizontal doors opened, and Veltol entered the lobby.

The lobby was spacious, with a color palette and interior somewhat similar to the furnishings in Marcus's past manor. There were a few people in suits here and there.

In a corner was a bizarrely prominent presence: a mysterious, short and chubby, pink costumed character.

"What is that strange rabbit...? Or rather, that literal insult to rabbits..."

The character noticed Veltol's stares and waved at him, but Veltol ignored it and looked away.

He headed straight for the elf woman standing at the circular reception desk by the entrance.

"What can I help you with today?" she asked with a smile.

Veltol felt something was off about her facial expression and, indeed, her entire aura. Her voice was also flat, lacking any real humanity.

"Tell Marcus that Veltol has arrived. He'll know what to do."

"...Unable to confirm any previous visits. I'm afraid we cannot allow any visits without a prior appointment," she answered in a polite yet direct manner, her voice just as flat and a smile still on her face.

"Never mind that; just tell Marcus I'm here."

"I'm afraid we cannot allow any visits without a prior appointment," she repeated with the same expression and tone.

"Sigh... For goodness' sake, does no one in this day and age know who I am?"

So be it.” Veltol decided to use magic to get done with it quickly. *“Rexagino.”*

This spell made it possible to manipulate a target’s mind through their mana. A type of charm, it temporarily attracted the target to the caster. In the hands of the Demon Lord’s magitech, the spell was almost as powerful as a geas.

“Call Marcus.” So the Demon Lord demanded.

This was an absolute command a mere elf receptionist shouldn’t be able to resist. *Shouldn’t* being the operative word.

“B-level mana assault detected against this unit. Suspect designated a threat. Authorities have been contacted. Now entering combat mode.”

“Wha—?!”

Veltol was shocked. The elf woman appeared unfazed by his mindjacking, and not only that—she was now on top of the desk taking a fighting stance.

“Wh-what’s happening...?”

“What’s that guy doing...?”

The people in suits, startled as well, turned to look at the sudden commotion happening at the entrance.

Did she block it...?! How?!

Veltol immediately reconsidered the situation. It didn’t feel like his magic had been blocked—it was as if it had never taken effect in the first place. Like trying to use mind control on a tree or a rock.

So that means...

Between his feeling that something was off, the elf’s reaction to the magic, and even her motions when getting on top of the booth...

It’s one of those things Machina was talking about...an automaton!

Veltol’s guess was correct. The receptionist wasn’t an elf; she was a magiroid made to resemble them. In other words, a robot. Of course mind control didn’t work on her.

“I will now suppress the threat.”

“Ha! A modern-day puppet? This should be entertaining.”

Just as they were about to enter battle, a calm voice echoed through the lobby:

“That’s enough.”

The unrest settled immediately.

“T-260F, cease all combat operations.”

“Administrative order received.”

The magiroid immediately relaxed and returned to the reception desk. Veltol turned his attention to the voice’s source: a human woman exiting the elevator.

She appeared to be in her early twenties; her long hair was in a ponytail, and she was wearing a women’s business suit.

Veltol couldn’t take his eyes off her. She was good-looking, yes, but that wasn’t why he was staring. Still poised for battle, he’d instinctively turned his attention from the magiroid to her.

She reminded him of a fine naked blade. Clearly, this was no regular woman. It was obvious from her poise that her confidence came from plentiful combat training and surviving many a serious fight.

Her aura was enough to let the Demon Lord conclude she was strong.

She walked straight toward him, then stopped just a meter away.

“Please excuse T-260F’s discourtesy. This product line also functions as a security guard, so it is very sensitive to magical attacks. You have my apologies.” She bowed deeply with an affable smile on her face.

Even while giving that charming smile, her sword-like aura didn’t falter.

“I am Director Marcus’s private secretary. My name is Kinohara.”

“I’m Veltol.”

“Yes, I am aware. I took the liberty of looking at the footage of your exchange with T-260F. You asked to meet the director, correct? He’s instructed me to let you in, so I will guide you to his office.”

Veltol followed Kinohara into the elevator.

She operated the control panel, then the elevator quickly began rising. The weight of gravity on their bodies was barely noticeable, however, thanks to the constant use of gravity-manipulation magic.

A heavy silence settled over the elevator, which was much too spacious for just the two of them. Were there a third person there, the tension would be enough to make them faint.

Veltol stared wordlessly at Kinohara's chest.

"...Can I help you?" She glared at him, thinking he was looking at her breasts.

However, that wasn't the case. Veltol was staring at the strange decoration on the end of the pen clipped to her suit's breast pocket.

"Oh, that bizarre creature caught my attention... There was one at the entrance, too. Is that a...rabbit...?"

"You must be quite the connoisseur to have noticed. It's our company's mascot, Ishimary. We intend to expand its popularity worldwide."

"R-right... Indeed, it's quite the, uh, distinctive creature, I see..."

They arrived at the top floor in no time.

The elevator's doors opened, and they immediately found themselves at the director's office.

It felt empty and desolate compared to the lobby. That much was to be expected, since the immensely spacious office took up an entire floor, but most of all, it was practically bare. There was a chair and a desk, but nothing more. The walls were made of glass, allowing an unbroken view of Shinjuku's nightscape.

Facing the elevator was the company director, like a king in his castle.

His hair was pure white and his skin brown, his eyes red and his ears long. He wasn't in the crimson armor Veltol was used to seeing him in—instead, he was wearing a crimson suit, a long scarf around his neck, and red-rimmed glasses.



One of the Six Dark Peers, this slim man was an immortal dark elf vampire who had overcome the sunlight and his instinct to suck blood—the Duke of the Bloody Arts, Marcus.

“Long time no see...Marcus.”

Veltol instinctively smiled once he saw Marcus sitting on his chair.

It had seemed entirely likely that the director was a different person with the same name as the duke. More than anything, Veltol was simply happy to finally meet his confidant again.

Veltol hadn't lost everything just yet. He couldn't take back what he had lost, but he still had hope.

“It's truly been a long time, my king. I knew you would stop by ever since I sensed the mana waves from your Ell Stunna a while ago,” Marcus replied in his shrill voice, still sitting calm and collected on his chair. Right behind him was the IHMI logo blown up and printed across the wall.

“...”

Veltol felt a little confused, and angered, by Marcus's attitude.

Veltol was the king; Marcus was his vassal. At least from Veltol's point of view, that hadn't changed after five hundred years. And needless to say, it was disrespectful for a vassal to remain seated when receiving their king.

First of all, Marcus—not his secretary—should have welcomed Veltol. Furthermore, he should've been present at Veltol's revival along with Machina.

“Marcus, it's rude to remain seated before your king.” Veltol glared at him.

That was enough to make the surrounding aether waver and the reinforced glass vibrate. And yet, Marcus didn't move an inch—a faint smile was still on his face.

“...Fine, I'll allow it for the time being,” Veltol added.

This was Marcus's personal castle, built after surviving five hundred tumultuous years. Veltol respected that and didn't reprimand him any further.

“So, my king, what have you come all the way here for?” Marcus asked while

looking away and leaning back in his chair.

Now there was no speck of reverence left in his behavior. On the contrary, it felt as though he was provoking Veltol.

Veltol would've immediately chopped Marcus's head off had this happened five hundred years earlier, but now, he was feeling more confused than anything.

As far as he remembered, Marcus was a loyal vassal. He never would have imagined him acting this way.

"I'll get to that. But first, you should be celebrating my revival, Marcus."

"Yes...I suppose you're right."

"...Very well. Marcus, I command you as the Immortal King: Help me rebuild the Immortal Kingdom and take over the world."

The first thing Marcus did after hearing that was...

"Ha!"

...laugh.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He covered his face and arched his back as his cackling echoed throughout the room.

"Marcus..."

Then, his cackling came to a sudden stop.

"I refuse."

He looked straight at the Demon Lord with his blood-colored eyes when declining.

"What did you just—?"

"I said I refuse, my king. No..." His intentions were clear from his gaze. "...Veltol."

He was looking down on him. His eyes were as if he looked at someone of lower birth—the same glance many immortals directed to mortals.

“You dare address me in such manner, you vulgar—?”

Veltol was now fully set on killing him, when...

“Dragon Blade: Chidori.”

...Kinohara, standing right behind him, activated her mana and dictated a *maginom*. She was clearly hostile.

Veltol turned around to find her holding a katana sheathed in a black scabbard.

“—?!”

He dodged to the side, right up to the window, as soon as he saw it.

A flash of light and a gust of wind, followed by the graceful sound of the katana being sheathed again.

“...A clean unsheathe?”

Clean unsheathing was the name of an old sword technique.

Veltol was astonished by Kinohara’s unsheathing and sheathing speed. Even in his weakened state, he barely caught sight of her blade.

And speed wasn’t the only astounding thing about her technique. The instantaneous flash of light he saw and the nature of the mana he perceived tipped him off: Her strike had been imbued with mana-infused electricity.

He was only able to evade the attack thanks to his many close brushes with death. Had he faltered for one mere instant, he would have been decapitated.

And still, the blade had scraped his cheek—she had made the Demon Lord shed blood.

My reflexes must have dulled considerably for me to have been unable to completely dodge it. That blade of hers... I don’t think she summoned it. It’s too realistic... Perhaps she used magic to forge it instead of cast it? In any case...

Besides the lightning-quick swordsmanship, Veltol felt something was off about Kinohara’s movements. Despite her using armament-forging magic, he didn’t hear an incantation. Moreover, she appeared to have skipped two other magical processes: construction and expansion. That was supposed to be

impossible.

But Veltol had no time to be thinking about that. Kinohara was already crouched low, ready to unleash a second attack at any moment.

“That’s enough, Kinohara.”

She relaxed her posture at Marcus’s command.

Veltol wiped the blood from his cheek, and the wound started closing bit by bit. The recovery didn’t come from magic—it was his own immortal regenerative ability.

“You’ve grown weak... But I assume you must know that better than anyone,” Marcus told him with a pitiful gaze. “Years ago, a wound like that would’ve healed before you spilled even a drop of blood.”

He was correct.

Veltol’s decreased faith had sapped not only his mana but his regenerative abilities, too.

“Why, Marcus...?” he asked.

“Why? Do I really have to spell it out for you?” Marcus shot him the most scornful look. “Take over the world? Rebuild the Immortal Kingdom? Please, enough drivel. Such times are long gone, Veltol. The world has ended, the Immortal Kingdom has fallen—and now look at yourself.”

“...”

“The faith you used as a crutch and the fear you represented is now lost to oblivion. All those legends and myths about you are among the annals of history—simple entertainment, mere factoids. I have no reason to kneel to you. Now begone from my sight.” He paused. “Unless...*you* do the kneeling. Grovel before me and I might consider lending you a hand.”

He smirked, then licked his lips. His eyes glimmered with delight.

“.....”

Veltol took a step forward, convinced there was nothing else to say. He wasn’t about to overlook such impertinence. No matter how loyal Marcus had

been in the past, Veltol's duty as a king was to punish any insolent underlings.

"Kinohara, stay out of this," Marcus warned.

"Understood."

He got up from his chair.

"Marcus...", Veltol began.

Veltol initialized a spell. That first step, like the subtle movements a dragon made before breathing fire, was enough to make the surrounding aether, air, and even the glass tremble.

"Duke of the Bloody Arts, you must understand that not even you can defeat me."

"Shall we put that to the test?" Marcus taunted.

Veltol and Marcus each extended their right hands and spread their fingers.

In order to activate magic, one needed to go through initialization, construction, expansion, incantation, and the proclamation. Not even the Demon Lord was exempt from these rules, even though he had factitiously achieved chantless magic. The abbreviation of this single step out of the five was enough to give him a great advantage in magical warfare.

Veltol had fought many a formidable opponent throughout his thousands of years of living, but he had never lost in a battle of magic. All kinds of warriors, heroes, and great sorcerers yearned for his strength and challenged him to battle, and every single one of them was defeated.

Not even Marcus, the most apt in magical warfare out of the Six Dark Peers, could live up to the mystic technique only the Demon Lord was capable of.

Defeat was impossible so long as Veltol had that advantage.

He loudly dictated the maginom:

"Vel—"

But Marcus...

"You're two steps behind me, Veltol."

...merely scoffed.

“Spell Breaker!”

Marcus was quicker to activate his magic. The magic circle in the palm of his hand expanded.

“Wha—?!”

Veltol’s eyes widened in astonishment.

This wasn’t a spell for shooting fire or light. It was much more subtle—one could barely tell he’d cast anything. And it was of the highest level in magical warfare.

Marcus looked as if he’d done nothing, as did Veltol. Rather, he *couldn’t* do anything. He managed to articulate what had just occurred:

“You...canceled my magic...?!”

There were two main methods of dealing with magic: The first was through resistance, a type of passive defense magic that provided a simple yet effective way to protect oneself directly through mana. The second method was to cancel, as Marcus had done. Canceling involved interfering with one of the five steps of magic, thus nullifying it.

Canceling was different from resisting in that it was an active form of defense by counterattacking. One had to have full understanding of the technic the opponent was trying to activate and stop it before all magical processes were complete. This wasn’t impossible, in theory, but in practice, only Veltol was able to consistently achieve it, thanks to his chantless magic.

Canceling was already a herculean task, but to activate it faster than Veltol’s chantless magic was impossible...or at least, it should have been impossible.

Veltol couldn’t believe it, but it was useless denying what had just happened.

“This can’t be... How?” He once again asked for an explanation.

“How, you ask? Ha! Ha-ha-ha...”

Marcus laughed darkly.

The dominance he felt over his opponent, whom he had feared and served

before, gave him a rush. He felt like a conqueror, finally standing atop the previously undefeated champion. Sadistic pleasure coursed throughout his body. He was, in fact, erect.

“You wish to know why someone like you, capable of chantless magic, could have your magic canceled by me and my inferior mastery of the craft? Is that what’s going through your mind right now?! Oh, how could this happen to the Demon Lord Veltol?! Why?! It can’t be!”

Veltol was confused at the sudden explosion of emotions. As far as he remembered, Marcus was slightly neurotic but nonetheless a level-headed and courteous man. He was the brains behind the Six Dark Peers, and as such, Veltol greatly valued and trusted him.

To see him change so much over the course of five hundred years had Veltol more baffled than angry, and most of all—saddened.

How had Marcus ended up like this? Or had he been this way from the very beginning? The Demon Lord had no answer.

There was no trace of the noble darkling once known as Marcus. A contemptuous sneer reminiscent of a lesser demon arose on his face as he turned around.

“It’s thanks to this.” He pointed at his nape.

Embedded there was a small piece of black metal flickering with a green light. Veltol sensed a small amount of mana coming from it.

He had already seen this same device before on all the people walking the streets.

“What is that?” he asked. He guessed it was something meant to aid magic activation, like the wands used by apprentice mages—some sort of magi-gadget.

“This is the Familia, the fruits of human intelligence and cutting-edge magineering.”

The Familia was a type of magi-gadget born from the union of sorcery and engineering—magineering. By connecting it to one’s spinal cord and brain, it

could expand the latter's capacity, essentially functioning as a second brain. It was a digital assistant that took no physical space.

By connecting their brains to the Familia, people could improve their affinity with airborne aether and connect through it to other Familias or computers, surpassing the internet of old to create a new communications technology: the aethernet.

That was Marcus's explanation.

"To summarize," he continued, "it's like connecting a computer to your body. Although I doubt your feeble intellect is enough to comprehend as much."

Marcus wasn't wrong—Veltol didn't understand most of those words.

"The true value of the Familia, however, lies in magical warfare," Marcus stated proudly. "The original plan came about near the end of City War I, when resources and personnel were scarce. The idea was to get children and those with no magitech training to enlist as quickly and efficiently as possible. And the inventor of this technology is none other than me."

He was overwhelming Veltol with information, with zero intention of having him actually understand any of it. He simply wanted to boast about his accomplishments—he was itching to brag.

"Technological innovation has kept on advancing, and now, the Familia's quantum processing device takes care of the initialization, construction, and even expansion processes. One simply selects the desired magic and issues the proclamation to activate it. This development is the main purpose of the Familia; the construction of the aether network and the development of aether communications are mere by-products," he went on. "Let me phrase this so that even someone as thickheaded as you can understand: All intelligent beings in the modern world regardless of age can not only use chantless magic but constructless and expansionless, too."

"This is outrageous..."

Veltol realized what was off about Kinohara's movements just now. She had activated magic by omitting steps through the Familia.

This technique Veltol had spent such a long time developing thanks to his

outstanding talent had been outdone in a mere five hundred—nay, eighty years.

“Furthermore, the Familia is incompatible with undying flesh—beings whose souls have reached godlike heights. That means that you, Veltol. Of course, I designed the basic technic that way from the very beginning.”

“What...?”

“I wouldn’t be in such a lofty position if you could use a Familia yourself once you revived, would I? I couldn’t allow that to happen.”

That meant Marcus had been prepared to oppose Veltol since long ago—that he was ready to become his enemy.

“—!”

Veltol once again framed and expanded the same magic, this time even more quickly than before.

But no matter how fast he was, he was still two whole steps behind Marcus.

“Spell Breaker!”

His magic was canceled before he could dictate it.

“Ugh...!”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Your magical processing speed is impressive—nowhere near a Familia’s, but well above human limitations. I would expect no less from the Demon Lord himself. I’m only able to cancel it since I know your technic’s composition...but in any case, the Familia is a necessary product for everyday life in the current world. And being unable to use one, you’re quite behind the times...”

Marcus looked at him with pity, like a teacher staring at a poorly performing student.

“Such a shame... The Demon Lord who once spread fear throughout the whole world is no different than a drunken lowlife wasting away in a filthy alley... You’re beneath kobold dung, no better than the stain left behind by a creeping slime... Your decline is truly, deeply pitiful.”

Marcus was quick to insult his former king.

“In fact, let me make myself perfectly clear: You are worth less than troll shit.”

Marcus had always had a deep understanding of magitech, so Veltol recognized how proud he was of his contributions to modern technological development. But he couldn't understand why Marcus held such intense hatred for him.

“Why, Marcus?! Why would you do all this—?!”

“Why?” Marcus pushed up his glasses. “You keep asking the same question over and over again. It's pathetic how you can be so dense. Ignorance is a sin, Veltol.”

“...!”

“Did you seriously think my loyalty to you was sincere?”

“What...?”

“I couldn't stand you from the very beginning.”

“...”

“You're tyrannical, you're vain, you're better than me in every possible way—I've always hated you from the bottom of my heart! Oh, how many times I've fantasized about destroying you! Yet you've managed to overcome destruction, too! I can't stand the sight of you! Can you even understand how I felt, having to work under such a dreadful man for so long?! Huh?! Can you?!” Marcus screamed, his eyes bloodshot with delirium. “...Excuse me, I lost my temper.”

“Was I...misguided this entire time?” Veltol clenched his teeth so hard they nearly cracked.

He always knew Marcus had ambition, and he thought well of the fact. He could've easily seen this coming. And yet, Marcus was still one of his vassals, who lived and fought by his side for such a long time. Veltol found himself in a vastly different world, betrayed by a close confidant—the psychological damage was huge.

“Indeed, you were,” Marcus declared, bluntly and mercilessly. “But that no longer matters. I don't have the time to keep on clinging to a piece of garbage.”

Veltol concluded there was no point in trying to reach a mutual understanding. In which case, fighting was the only option. He had to draw the line, as king.

“Marcuuusss!” Veltol raised his arms and initialized his magic.

“Looks like you still don’t get it. *Bloodsword!*”

However, Marcus activated his own even faster than Veltol’s chantless technique.



Thirteen red swords appeared around Veltol.

Just as the title of the Duke of the Bloody Arts indicated, Marcus specialized in magic that used blood as its medium. Bloodsword was one of his favorites—a spell that transformed airborne aether into blood.

One of the bloodswords around Veltol rushed at him and stabbed him deep in one side.

“Argh...!”

The pain made Veltol fall to his knees, halting his magic’s activation.

His sturdy body and rigid skin, bones, and muscles weren’t his only defenses—as an immortal, he also had regenerative abilities. On top of that, the stronger his power as an immortal was, the less pain he felt. Pain was, after all, a way to signal the approach of the body’s death. A strong immortal would feel no pain even if literally minced to bits.

Veltol was in as much pain as a regular human, which proved how greatly he had weakened.

Five centuries earlier, Bloodsword had required three seconds of chanting to activate, but now there was no sign of an incantation, let alone any construction or expansion.

Marcus had truly achieved a technique superior to chantless magic, if everything he said was correct, and to a scale that anybody could do it.

“These days, even an ogre child can manage this much. You heard that right. You are now the world’s slowest sorcerer.”

Marcus made a fist, and the remaining red blades pierced Veltol’s body.

“Argh...! Gah...!”

“Now then, it’s time I ask you to leave.”

Three more swords appeared in front of Marcus before shooting straight at Veltol. Their momentum didn’t stop, taking him with them and breaking the glass behind him so as to blast him to the skies.

“Farewell, my king. *Blood Bomb!*”

The bloodswords perforating Veltol exploded, scattering his flesh everywhere.

Marcus watched as the pieces fell from the sky and said to Kinohara behind him, “Call management and tell them to fix the window in the director’s room.”

“Understood. By the way, Director...”

“What is it?”

“Couldn’t that man serve as firewood? I heard he was the former Demon Lord, an immortal.”

“Faith in him is too low. He’s lost too much power to be useful. Besides, he’s even greater than an immortal. There’s no point in feeding him to the Furnace. Just let him be. This is the best use for him. Let him suffer pathetically in this new world.” Marcus chuckled darkly. “And with Veltol reborn, that means someone helped him complete Methenoel. Take a look at the list again and do a background check.”

“Understood.”

“And about that rat sniffing around in the Furnace—how’s that purge going?”

“The plan is progressing accordingly. There’s a high chance of problems arising, so once we detect it, I’ll go take care of it myself, instead of outsourcing it to an allied guild.”

“Good. That sounds encouraging.” Marcus looked at the broken window again and said softly, “The old Demon Lord’s fantasy is over. It is time for me to become the true Demon Lord.”

“Is something the matter, sir?”

“Hmph!” He snorted, and no more interest for Veltol arose.

“Excuse me, Director.”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to discuss the distribution of Ishimary merchandising.”

“...Don’t ask me for help. Hold a project meeting first.”



His regeneration was slow.

Veltol staggered near a corner on the main street, feeling the full pain of his reduced faith.

Marcus had blown him to smithereens, sending his scattered flesh to the ground all the way from the IHMI building's highest floor. Regenerating from that was time consuming.

Veltol's mana conversion efficiency was low, and even using the majority of his resources in regenerating, he could barely keep his appearance on a superficial level. He looked fine from the outside, but his insides felt as if he had been put through a blender, his organs haphazardly bunched up together.

Regenerating from wounds and reviving from death were two entirely different things. The latter cost an overwhelming amount of mana in order to reference one's complex physical data recovered from their soul right before death.

Faith in Veltol had plummeted, leaving him only as powerful as the lowest immortal. Even regenerating was hugely taxing.

"Dammit..."

Five hundred years ago, he would've fully recovered within seconds of the explosion. But not in this state.

Feeling dizzy, he put a hand on the filthy wall and managed to support himself to walk.

How pitiful he looked. This was the Demon Lord who had shaken Alnaeth to its core and maddened the world in fear of him.

Veltol had never experienced such humiliation.

The skies were once again covered by thick clouds. He couldn't see the moon peeking through like earlier.

Without the moon's sublime light, the sky was cloaked in somber darkness. The ground, meanwhile, was bursting with color as if it were shining a spotlight on this defeated man.

His influence on the world long gone, it felt as though the sky was telling Veltol this was no longer the Demon Lord's age—that he was behind the times.

“Argh...”

Veltol bumped into a muscle-bound figure and clumsily tripped. He was so fatigued even the smallest impact made him lose his balance.

“Hah? Hey, you bastard, you’re not gonna apologize for that just now?” The big ogre he bumped into glared at him.

Ogres were known for their red skin and the two horns growing from their heads.

This one had a battle tattoo from his chest up to his cheek and golden hair styled in a mohawk. Despite the cold weather, he was wearing only a tank top and cargo pants. His arms were made of unrefined steel—prostheses.

“You insolent descendant of the Blood Alliance... Who...do you take me for...?” Veltol glared back at the ogre while unsteadily getting to his feet.

“The what? Blood Alliance?”

“Heh... So your brain is too small...for you to understand even that much...”

He taunted the ogre as he spat up regurgitated gastric juice, and along with it his now meaningless pride as Demon Lord.

“...I’ll fucking kill you,” the ogre growled.

He approached, then threw a swift right hook. His buildup was long, as if he was making light of Veltol. But Veltol wasn’t the Demon Lord for nothing. There was no way he would lose to a mere ogre punk even in bare-handed close combat.

However...

“Take this!”

“Gargh!”

...that only applied when Veltol’s insides weren’t a chaotic mess.

The ogre’s steel arm sank into Veltol’s side, throwing him off balance.

Most Alnaethian warfare had been done through magic since antiquity, leaving individual physical strength largely dismissed in favor of mana or magic capabilities. That was one reason why the species of the Blood Alliance were

regarded with disdain.

But the tables turned when it came to hand-to-hand combat.

An ogre's steely muscles and the sturdy bones supporting them meant that even the most physically fit human paled in comparison to the average ogre's athleticism.

Ogres were the top of all species in simple physical strength. There was no way Veltol, with his reduced faith and power, on top of being severely injured, could put up a fight.

"And another!"

The ogre slammed his fist into Veltol, practically snapping the Demon Lord's body in two.

"Gah...!"

He received two more blows to the torso, then his knees gave out, and he collapsed.

"Bleeegh!"

He vomited blood and pieces of his still regenerating organs onto his hands and the ground beneath him. Somehow, his immediate thought was that he needed to clean himself up.

"That oughtta put ya in your place. Damn hairless monkey... Try pickin' on someone your own size next time, eh?"

The ogre grinned sadistically, glad to be able to unleash such violence.

The brute kicked and stomped on Veltol over and over and over again, from his head, his flank, thighs, back, pit of his stomach, and finally, his chin.

Veltol curled into a ball and covered his head as the blows kept on coming.

Why?

The ogre trampled his face, and blood gushed out of his nose.

Why did I lose?

The ogre kicked his teeth in, and he swallowed them on reflex.

How did it end up like this?

One of his eardrums burst.

Why?

The ogre punched him in the stomach, and he threw up again.

Veltol's head was full of questions.

No one walking the streets tried to help him. They either paid him no mind or sped up to get past the brawl without being dragged into it. No one tried to report it to the City Guard, either. But such incidents weren't uncommon here in Shinjuku.

The ogre lifted Veltol by his hair. His face was tremendously swollen; he couldn't even properly open his right eye.

Then the ogre spat in his face and said, "That's what you get for talkin' shit, you damn shrimp. And now I see you got no Familia, neither. What's up with that? Some sorta religious thing? I don't get you anti-technology people."

"Argh... You measly ogre... How dare you... I'll kill you...! *Sword—!*"

Veltol tried to chant a spell, but sooner than he could...

"Off you go! *Wind Blast!*"

...the ogre's magic activated first.

A sphere of wind appeared within the ogre's right hand clutching Veltol's abdomen, then instantly burst.

The spell didn't do much damage, but it was enough to send the Demon Lord flying.

Veltol's body shot backward like a piece of trash slammed into a garbage can—and landed amid a heap of rubbish in the dump site across the street.

The ogre pumped his fist before walking away, laughing in hysterics. Veltol could see the light of his Familia shining on his nape.

Surrounded by trash and unable to move, Veltol simply looked up to the sky. Then a drop of rain fell on his cheek.

A heavy downpour immediately followed. The rain pelted him ruthlessly, so strong it could almost tear his body. As though the world itself was laughing at the now obsolete Demon Lord.

He closed his eyes.

“Why did I lose...?”

That was the only thing on his mind.

He couldn't believe he had lost to a mere ogre. But the reason was quite simple: Human intellect and technology had far exceeded any demon lord's powers over the past five hundred years.

Veltol was merely behind the times.

Even if he tried getting a Familia, he wouldn't be able to use it if what Marcus said was right. And Veltol was certain that Marcus had been telling the truth.

After all, he had just discovered that a mere ogre could activate magic faster than him.

“Why did I lose...?”

Even though he understood the reasoning, he kept on asking the same unanswerable question.

Because we can see the value in life's little glimmers.

From all his tangled-up thoughts and mangled brain, the words of that man from five centuries before (mere moments ago from his point of view) resurfaced.

“Ridiculous... Life? The light of life? ...Such nonsense...such...”

Veltol closed his eyes and feebly shook his head, as though denying those words.

“Lord Veltol?! ”

He heard a voice.

“Machina...?”

“Are you all right?! ”

He opened his eyes to see Machina looking at him with worry.

Veltol averted his gaze. He didn't want Machina to see him in this state.

The two of them headed to Machina's home to avoid the downpour.

Shinjuku was built around the aether reactor at its center, and the elevated loop line divided the city into two zones: Inner Shinjuku and Outer Shinjuku.

Within the loop line was Inner Shinjuku, where Veltol and Machina had been moments before. This area had been redistricted during postwar redevelopment, and four main streets stretched out in the cardinal directions from the restricted zone around the reactor. This densely populated section of Shinjuku had a resplendent, bustling downtown full of skyscrapers.

Outer Shinjuku, on the other hand, hadn't been redeveloped; many buildings remained exactly as they were right after the war. It was a gray, ruinous sprawl.

This part of Shinjuku was home to many slums filled with refugees from the City Wars, displaced persons, and those without a citizen ID—and even people who did have a citizen ID but couldn't afford the rent in Inner Shinjuku. Outer Shinjuku was still within the cryotolerance zone, but its distance from the central aether reactor meant the climate was much colder than Inner Shinjuku.

Shinjuku's structure was simple, based on the proximity to its center: The closer you got, the more prosperous your environs. The farther you got, the more desolate things became.

Meanwhile, Veltol and Machina were heading to a district in Outer Shinjuku, near the loop line.

They barely spoke on their way there.

"...Forgive me," Machina said, unable to endure the silence any longer.

"Why are you apologizing?" Veltol asked.

"The Immortal Hunt was all Marcus's doing, taking advantage of his position as the director of IHMI. He betrayed his fellow immortals so that he could be the only remaining one."

"...I see."

“That’s why I’ve been avoiding him... It’s all my fault for not informing you of Marcus’s betrayal... Maybe I could’ve stopped you... If only I had told you from the beginning, my lord...this wouldn’t have happened...”

“No need. Even if you had mentioned it, I probably would’ve still gone to see him. Now tell me, Machina, are there any other immortals left?”

“A number of others escaped the Hunt as I did, but...I haven’t been able to get in contact with many as of late. Immortals are still disappearing. I’ve even lost contact with Ornared and Palmlock, my close aides. I don’t know if they’ve gone into hiding somewhere or...”

“Or if they’ve ended up in trouble...? So the Immortal Hunt is still ongoing?”

“No...that was decades ago... These days, anti-immortal prejudice is nowhere near as prevalent as it once was. The Immortal Hunt proper ended before City War II.” Machina’s voice was somber. “...I visited Orna and Palm’s home after I lost contact with them. The place had been ransacked, and they’d left a hastily scribbled note.”

“What did it say?”

“Two words, in elvish: Immortal Furnace.”

“Immortal Furnace...”

He had never heard the term.

“I hope they’re both okay...”

Machina looked up at the sky. She sounded terribly worried. They had been not only her vassals but close friends while Veltol was gone for five hundred years. It was only natural for her to be concerned about them.

After walking a little while longer, Machina stopped.

“This is where I live.”

It was a box-shaped building with an iron roof. Many such buildings were stacked one on top of the other to form a housing complex supported by steel frames and connected by shoddy stairways and passages.

This was a tofu apartment building, made of tofu houses—so named for their

precariousness.

“Wow,” said Veltol. “It’s perhaps not the most elegant residence, but it’s certainly big. Bravo for getting hold of such a castle despite the state of the world.”

“Ah-ha-ha...”

Machina could only awkwardly laugh at the huge misunderstanding.

They went up the noisy, rusty stairs, illuminated by the flickering white aether neon.

When they reached the second floor, Machina unlocked the door, turned the knob, and opened the creaky iron door to expose the interior of her house.

“Quite cramped, even for a storeroom,” Veltol mumbled earnestly as he looked around.

It was as small on the inside as it looked from the outside.

The entrance, so narrow only one person could pass through at a time, led to a similarly narrow hallway, in the middle of which was a tiny kitchen, which led to a prefab bathroom at the back. In a corner of the apartment was an old, outdated fridge, and in the center was a round table. A sliding glass door led to the balcony, and before it was a single futon.

It really was a small abode, quite detached from Veltol’s conception of a house.

“Actually...this is my apartment,” said Machina.

“Hmm? No, that much I understand, but for one of the Six Dark Peers to get proper sleep—”

“No, Lord Veltol.” She smiled sadly. “*This* is where I sleep.”

One room, one kitchen, one bathroom. That was the entire residence of the Dark Lord’s retainer, one of the Six Dark Peers, the Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze, Machina.

“Ha-ha, enough jokes, Machina.”

“It’s no joke, sir,” she declared. “This is my entire ‘castle.’ It’s all I can afford...”

Like all immortals, Machina didn't age. In order to escape the Immortal Hunt, she had to relocate constantly. Every city she went to, she had to forge her documentation and lie about her date of birth in order to get a job, however little it paid.

If she stayed in one place for too long, people would notice she didn't age and start suspecting her. Therefore, she had no choice but to go where no one knew her. During the height of the Immortal Hunt, she'd had to repeat this cycle even more frequently.

That was unquestionably one of the most humiliating times in Machina's life.

"..."

Veltol could say no more.

Machina's tone and expression were enough to tell she was saying the truth.

In all honesty, Veltol knew as much from the very beginning. She wasn't the type to crack jokes like this.

There were no sturdy ramparts, no magnificent thrones or canopy beds, no luxury furniture or numerous servants here. Her castle was empty.

It was nothing like the castle she once had in the Immortal Kingdom. Her new home was, to put it bluntly, no more than a tiny, shabby room.

"Machina."

"Yes?"

"You've been living this way this entire time?"

"..." Machina went silent for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I have..."

"I see..."

Veltol's slumber had amounted to five hundred years of Machina's life. To her, it must have felt like an eternity.

Veltol couldn't even begin to comprehend what sort of hardships, adversity, and humiliation she had experienced. And how could he, as a king? He had never lived through anything close to this.

Perhaps there was no need for his sympathy as a king, but just knowing she

had been living in such a place made his heart swell with indescribable emotion.

“I’m so sorry...”

So he held her small body tight. That was the only thing he could do for her now. He had no reward or glory to give her.

“Forgive me, Machina... I’ve made you wait for so long...”

He only held her close and apologized.

“Lord...Veltol...”

Her small shoulders were shaking. Veltol hugged her even tighter as if to stop her trembling.

“You’ve more than proven your loyalty, Machina... Well done...!”

He offered his one remaining vassal the sincerest praise he could muster. There was nothing further he could do.

She cried on his chest. Tears she hadn’t shed in five hundred years.

“Lord Veltol...that’s...much too high praise for me...”

Veltol didn’t yet recognize the glimmer of light in his arms.

The only sound left was the driving rain against the iron roof.

CHAPTER TWO

The Demon Lord Gets a Job

The Familia's alarm function woke Machina up.

The alarm didn't sound by vibrating; it used aether communications to echo directly in the user's brain, as with the Whisper spell. It essentially forced a person to wake up.

She had been depressed at the thought of waking up the last few years. Or rather, the last five hundred years—not a single day went without her feeling down at the loss of her king.

But that was no longer the case.

Machina looked at Veltol, sleeping right beside her. She felt the warmth of someone by her side after so long.

It felt as though a void inside her had been filled. Indeed, it was a very fulfilling awakening.

"Eleclait."

She used the Familia's voice recognition to summon the artificial spirit installed within.

Like the Familia, artificial spirits were products of magineering. An extension of artificial intelligence technology, these manmade spirits with learning capabilities were converted into data and installed in Familias or computers.

"Good morning, Ms. Machina."

A girl appeared on Machina's virtual retinal display (VRD). Her long silver hair was done up on both sides, and she wore a black-and-white dress. The beautiful girl had red eyes and was barely fifteen centimeters tall, but of course she was only a collection of data—although it wasn't quite right to refer to her with feminine pronouns, since artificial spirits had no concept of gender. In any case,

the girl herself—Machina’s artificial spirit—was no more than an avatar.

“Today is day thirteen of the Month of the Dragon 2099 FE. It’s currently three minutes past six AM. The average temperature inside the cryotolerance zone is negative two degrees Celsius. Current room temperature is eighteen degrees. Relative humidity is sixty-two percent; aether pollution is twenty-three percent.”

“So it’s warm out. How are things this morning, Elec?”

“The Familia is currently running on normal mode. Magistorage and quantum processing conditions optimal. No problems detected in the aether network connection.”

“That’s not what I meant... Oh, forget it.”

Numerous article holograms appeared on Machina’s VRD. Her artificial spirit Eleclait had gathered news from various sites across the aethernet, to which the Familia was connected at all times.

IHMI announces the development of a new generation of its land-based magiweapon, the Exoframe... The war’s over, and they’re still making those things... Unless they have city conquest in mind, that’s way too much firepower for supposedly maintaining public order.

She flicked through each headline and skimmed the articles, then looked again at Veltol sleeping by her side. Was he still recovering from his wounds? Or was he just that tired from his five-hundred-year slumber?

His breathing was peaceful.

Seeing her king’s sleeping face after such a long time brought a smile to Machina’s lips. The simple fact of being together with him again brought her no end of joy.

She had been worried for five hundred long years about whether Methenoel would really work.

Machina genuinely felt that her king’s mere existence was itself her own source of happiness.

“Lord Veltol...,” she murmured.

His lofty goal of world domination was but a trifle to her. She wanted to make it happen precisely because he so wished it.

If only this happiness could last forever...

She put her hands together in prayer.

“Sh-shall we get going?”

At Machina’s suggestion, they left the house and headed for a clothing retailer near the loop line: UNI4LO. It was an old shop from before the Fantasion.

“Before anything else, we need to get you some clothing, my lord.”

His aether armor could easily pass as fashionable so long as he claimed he was a full-armor type magiborg, thanks to the current revival of the classic style, but it was still a bit much for everyday wear.

Plus, he needed something to protect him from Shinjuku’s cold.

I wish I could take him to several different places instead of settling for this cheap retailer, but it is what it is..., thought Machina.

Upbeat music played inside the large four-story building.

They made their way to the common-size section and looked around.

“I’m truly sorry, Lord Veltol. I realize I should provide you with much higher quality garments...”

“Ha, no matter. Dressing up is never the main point. When one is as truly beautiful as I am, no matter the cheapness of his clothes, that beauty keeps on shining through—in fact, I would argue the cheap clothing would only further prop up my looks.” A short pause. “What I mean is, I would be perfectly fine exposing my naked body to the masses.”

“No, please do wear something...”

The masses aren’t worthy of seeing your unclad beauty, my lord.

She had to restrain herself from saying that last part. Her long-forgotten memories of her lord’s strange habit of wandering about the Demon Castle nude resurfaced.

“Do you have any clothing preferences, Lord Veltol?”

“No, I’ll leave that to you.”

“As you wish.”

Machina was truly worried at his response. Choosing a king’s clothing was a huge responsibility. She had to make sure to choose an outfit that wouldn’t put him to shame.

Having said that, I don’t have many choices, financially speaking. In terms of cost, practicality, and versatility, the best option would be...

Machina thought about it from many angles before deciding on a simple monotone tracksuit.

N-no, wait—the Demon Lord shouldn’t be wearing a tracksuit!

She immediately shook her head, then glanced at Veltol; he was staring at the outfit in awe.

“This is it!” he proclaimed. “Such perfect form! This is exactly what I was looking for!”

“Huh? But this is just a track—” Machina was confused; who would’ve thought this would make him so excited?

“Your taste is exquisite, Machina. I knew I was right to leave this in your capable hands. This simple yet refined design is marvelous... Both materials and craftsmanship are far improved from my time.”

“W-well, if this is what pleases you, my lord...”

Machina also got a coat to keep him warm and went right to the register near the entrance, then handed both items to the magiroid cashier.

“Welcome!”

The magiroid swiftly put the clothing in a bag.

In this era, large shops like this one had magiroids working customer service.

“Thank you for your purchase!”

The magiroid handed Machina the bag and bowed. Then Machina received a

notification on her Familia regarding the payment from her bank. This was all done through the aethernet.

“Let’s go to our next stop,” she said, bag in hand.

“Wait a second, Machina. Don’t you have to pay for that?”

“Oh, I already did. All currency these days is digital. Shinjuku is a fully cashless city. There’s no such thing as physical money here.”

“Hmmm...?”

Veltol cocked his head, perplexed by the mysterious concept, which Machina found cute. They exited the store.

“Machina, I’ll take the bag.”

“No, I can’t have you—”

“Please, let me do this at least.”

“I-if you insist...”

Their fingers brushed against each other during the transfer, which was enough to make Veltol’s return feel real to Machina. She suddenly wanted to yell and burst into tears—the impulse to just hug him very tight was strong.

Ah, what a long five centuries that was...

Those many years without her lord had been a gray blur.

She’d been so worried whether Methenoel would actually work. Her desire to see Veltol once again was what kept her going.

That’s why she now felt so overjoyed to be reunited with him and spend time together in this new world.

Looking back, I think that was the moment when I was truly born.

Machina recalled the day she first met the Dark Lord Veltol many centuries earlier.

Machina Soleige was born in a mountainous region at the south of the Vanfall Kingdom’s territory in Alnaeth, in a small ignian village.

Ignia looked almost identical to humans. They had black hair and dark eyes,

tan skin, and most unique of all, initializing their mana turned their hair and eyes red due to their genetic affinity for fire.

Machina, however, was born with silver hair, light crimson eyes, and white skin.

Her fellow ignia found these differences repulsive. They called her names and talked about how unsightly she was behind her back.

One day, Machina was rescued in the forest by a phoenix. It granted her immortality—a double-edged sword—which only made her even more ostracized.

Many methods of execution were tried on her, but no attempt from that time—much less from such a remote village—managed to destroy her, until they decided to throw her into a volcano's crater.

Then, just as she was about to be executed...

...there came a gust of black wind.

Machina was sure she would never forget that moment, not until the day her soul rotted away.

That wind was a man with black hair, black robes, and a black sword.

The villagers who tried to kill Machina had collapsed.

Sparks fluttered in the breeze.

The black hair and coat billowed with the scorching wind. It was a sight straight out of a nightmare—a devil standing tall before destruction.

And yet, Machina knew he was her savior.

"I heard rumors of an immortal around here. And sure enough, it seems I've gotten my hands on quite the diamond in the rough," the man said with a bold smile. "Do you find my appearance frightful, woman?"

"Yes..." Machina nodded in response. Fear prevented her from saying any more.

His beauty was spine-chilling, his gaze striking. It was as if violence and fright had taken shape—yet his garments seemed noble.

She was so frightened she couldn't even blink.

The man stroked Machina's cheek.

"Beautiful. Your soul shines like the scorching, dazzling sun. I cannot have you perish here," he said to the girl who had only ever received glares of disgust before. "I am the Demon Lord Veltol, the man who will conquer the world. Come with me, woman. Devote your body and soul to me."

The Demon Lord extended his hand.

That was her king's first order.

A burning flame began lighting up within her—perhaps the flames of love.

"Hey... Hey, Machina."

Veltol brought her back from memory lane.

"Y-yes, sir! What is it?"

"So how exactly...does this Familia function?"

"Um, how do you mean, my lord?"

"Leaving Marcus's rebellion aside, the Familia certainly seems like quite the revolutionary device. So I was wondering about it..."

"Ah... True, it is very useful. You can surf the net while you work, for one thing. Apparently, Earth had similar handheld devices, but a Familia is certainly much more convenient than having to carry around a physical device."

"Hmmm. Let me see it."

Veltol suddenly reached out to Machina's neck. She reflexively winced and let out an uncharacteristic yelp: "Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you—?!"

"Don't move."

"Y-yes, sir!"

Machina shut her eyes, clenched her fists on top of her chest, and stiffened up.

His slender fingers brushed against her hair, touched her neck, and then slid around her Familia.

We're in public...! But I have to follow my lord's orders! I have no choice! Indeed, refusing him is completely beyond me! Nor do I have any reason to refuse!

Machina was ready for whatever came next, but Veltol withdrew his hand immediately. "That was all," he said.

"Huh? Ah! Yes...you wanted to see my Familia... Of course..."

"It doesn't bother you, having that attached to your nape?"

"It felt strange at first, but I'm already used to it."

"You got used to it...," he repeated to try and take it in.

"That's right," Machina replied. "Not having one is very inconvenient... Although as you can see, getting one of my own didn't improve my quality of life significantly..."

They continued walking in silence for a while, until Veltol turned to Machina and announced: "I'm going to look for a job."

"What? Lord Veltol, what are you—?"

"I said I will get myself a job."

"There's no need for you to do such a thing, my lord! We may be struggling right now, but I'll find a way to make things better! Specifically, um, I'll pick up more shifts to boost my income—"

"Times have changed, and I am not all-knowing nor all-powerful. Granted, not even the omnipotent gods of yore could predict the change that occurred eighty years ago. We—that is, I—have lived for an eternity and honored traditions for just as long, but perhaps the time has come for me to change."

"..."

"Besides, I can't stand around doing nothing while you work and provide me clothing, food, and shelter. Without my duties as king, I must now devote myself to labor. After all, the Demon Lord Army consists of only you and me at present."

"Lord Veltol..."

“Let me make myself clear, Machina. I haven’t given up on taking over the world.”

“I understand! I will continue to serve you as long as I live.”

As long as I live.

For an immortal, such a promise was akin to pledging eternal loyalty.



Once they finished shopping, Machina and Veltol went back home, and Veltol changed into his new clothes.

Veltol then ventured out into the city, though not before having to convince Machina to let him go alone.

Despite his grandiose statement, Veltol didn’t know how to get a job—he didn’t even have any idea of what sorts of jobs existed.

Such was the downside of having been a king and dedicating himself solely to politics for all those years.

However, his pride kept him from turning back and asking Machina what to do. He was also quite overconfident, convinced that he could get a job on his own. Nonetheless, he found himself wandering Shinjuku hoping for some sort of lead.

He passed through a narrow alley, and amid the stench of alcohol and cigarettes, an appetizing aroma wafted his way.

He looked to the back of the alley and saw a stall with a sign written in Japanese reading UDON. Red lanterns hung from the sign, and he saw orcs and goblins slurping steaming bowls of noodles.

“That looks delicious... What is it?”

This udon was made of soybeans instead of wheat. Soy had saved this archipelago from the food shortages during the dawn of the Fantasion because it could be mass-produced with little labor.

And soy’s usage was wide in its applications. It not only worked as food but as fuel, too. Soybeans were even called “the beans of life” in elvish.

Udon was comfort food for the islands these days.

There were many food stalls in this alley: udon shops, orc-style yakitori, pop-up pubs, sushi bars, and more, all of them emitting appetizing smells. The already narrow alley was so cramped that there was barely enough space for one person to walk through.

“I’m hungry... My faith must be at rock bottom for me to feel so famished... But it’s almost nostalgic. It’s been a long time since I last felt this,” Veltol muttered to himself while holding his growling stomach.

The bread and soup he had for breakfast was naturally not enough to fill him, and he had gone out without having lunch. Everything he looked at seemed appetizing. An immortal felt less pain the stronger they were, and this applied to hunger and thirst as well.

Veltol wasn’t at risk of dying of starvation, but the alluring smell stimulating his long-lost sense of hunger was hard to resist.

He did have some money. Machina had given him a PDA—a personal digital assistant—with electronic money in it. She’d explained how to use it, but he still couldn’t wrap his head around the concept. It was hard for him to believe such a small machine had money inside, when he had been using physical currency like gold or silver coins all his life.

Veltol kept on walking while thinking about that bizarre concept of economic transactions through digital data.

He noticed several vagabonds in the alley—not an uncommon sight in Shinjuku.

“Eh? Nah, I’m tellin’ you, man. Seriously, don’t worry about it. Bunny Bones has it covered. Yeah. Yeah. Thanks. And be careful, all right? I trust you, it’s just, we’re talkin’ confidential info here, that’s all.”

There was an orc vagabond talking on the phone in one of the booths left from wartime.

Another street urchin—a cat therian woman—was standing below a streetlight, just looking up at the clouds.

Seated on the ground was a dog therian man with a sign written in sloppy elvish: LOST MY LEG IN THE WAR. NO MONEY FOR A PROSTHESIS. THANK YOU FOR YOUR DONATION.

“ ... ”

Veltol looked at the therian with the sign and sank into thought.

Years ago, Veltol would've pitied the man, even scorned him. This begging would've disgusted him. But not anymore.

Machina's face came to mind. Considering her lifestyle up to this point, she had no trouble throwing her pride away.

Veltol stood beside the therian man and took a deep breath.

“Does anyone have a job for me?!” he shouted at the top of his lungs.

He was used to giving speeches or using Tei Sem to boost morale during wars, and he had even studied how to project his voice without magic.

“I have no money, so I'm looking for a job! I don't have many skills to speak of, but I'll do anything!”

Pedestrians turned to see what was going on only to shoot Veltol weird looks before passing by without saying a word.

The therian with the sign glared at him, annoyed.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” The orc in the phone booth approached Veltol before he could shout again.

Like the rest of the street urchins, the orc was dressed in tattered clothes, but given his complexion and build along with his gait and breathing, Veltol could tell that he was much healthier than the others.

“What are you doing?” the orc demanded.

“I'm looking for a job.”

“A job?”

“Correct.”

“Just take your citizen ID to the Commerce Guild. Granted, with the employment rate being what it is, you'll be hard up for an opening...”

“Citizen ID? What’s that?”

“You from out of town or something, man?”

“No, I’m from five hundred years in the past.”

The orc furrowed his brow. His frown was asking, *What the hell is up with this guy?*

“Whaaat?” he replied.

“Nothing,” said Veltol. “Forget about it.”

“Look, I don’t give a damn where you’re from, but we can’t have you doing this stuff on our turf.”

“Turf?”

“Yeah, this is our place. Even outcasts like us got our own set of rules. You’re messin’ up our business.”

“You’re doing business here?”

“Okay, I’ll only tell you ’cause you’re not from the city. There’s plenty of guys in this business we’ve got goin’ on in here. And by that I mean gettin’ our daily bread from generous donations. Although...I’ve got my own actual job elsewhere...”

“So you’re beggars? Is that profitable?”

“Eh, we get by. Look, I’m a nice guy, but you oughtta know there’s plenty of other folks more protective of their own turf, and with good reason, ’cause it’s a matter of life or death for them. So I recommend you don’t do something like that again—not anywhere.”

“I see...”

“You’d better go somewhere else if you want a job.”

“Yes, I understand. My apologies. Thank you.”

“No prob. Hang on—do you even have a résumé, man?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Figures. Have this.” He handed Veltol a crumpled-up piece of paper.

“What is it?” Veltol asked.

“You’ve never seen a résumé before?”

“Pardon?”

“You fill it out with your work experience for employers to examine. It’s super important to Earthoids, especially the Japanese. They say it’s tradition or whatever, though I personally think it’s stupid. Take it to the Commerce Guild’s employment information desk and maybe you’ll get something.”

“Now I understand. Much obliged. I am in your debt.”

“See that building over there with the huge sign that says Kaneyasu? That’s a junk dealer, but on the fourth floor you’ll find the closest Commerce Guild office. Oh, and also...” His tone had been amiable until then, but it suddenly turned serious. “...Don’t join any company connected to IHMI.”

“IHMI... Marcus’s business? Why?”

“You never hear nothin’ good. But hey, maybe I’m just paranoid. Their construction jobs are especially bad, though it’s slim pickings if you cut out anything that has to do with IHMI.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Veltol thanked him and left, brimming with hope and more eager than ever to find employment.



“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Silence fell over the room.

Specifically, a drawing room in the Commerce Guild. Veltol had used a translation spell and was now seated facing a sullen Japanese interviewer across a long table.

Machina had advised Veltol to tone down his regal demeanor when speaking with other people. He understood this was her nice way of telling him to lower himself to mortal commoners’ standards, approach them on equal terms.

He was trying his best to appear as “normal” as he could, but his inborn lordliness was too great to suppress—his mere presence was intimidating.

“U-um...Mr. Veltol,” the interviewer began.

“What? What’s the matter? Ask me anything. I don’t mind.”

Veltol’s imposing demeanor was making the interviewer sweat. It begged the question of who was interviewing whom.

“So...you have Dell Stella listed under your special skills...”

“Indeed, the annihilation star.”

“What exactly is this annihilation star?”

“It’s a type of large-scale annihilation magic.”

“Um, and what exactly would that be?”

“It allows you to instantaneously destroy an entire enemy army across a large area.”

“I see...”

“Indeed. But it’s one of my most secret and powerful magics, and as such, consumes a considerable amount of mana. I’m ashamed to admit I currently lack the sufficient power to use it.”

“...”

“...”

Silence.

“...You also list army tactics and strategic command.”

“Yes, leading large armies is my forte. I can say with confidence my capacity for accomplishing military objectives is unmatched. The Battle of Orbeall that took place in 723 of the Continental Era is a good example, though I have many other glorious achievements.”

“Orbe...what?”

“You don’t know the Battle of Orbeall?!”

“I’m, ah, afraid I’m not well-versed in such topics... By the way, what is this

‘construction of the Vaunheig Sanctuary dungeon’ under your list of achievements?”

“Ah yes, that’s one of the best dungeons I created. It was a difficult dungeon, yes, but difficulty isn’t what sets a truly great dungeon apart from the rest. You need to make the most of your limited manpower and budget without losing the thrill.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Silence once again.

“Um...about the ‘kingdom management’ listed in your work experience...”

“Yes, I was king for around a thousand years. My kingdom experienced many wars due to various political matters, but I’m told that happiness was mandatory among my subjects.”

“Right... Um, one more thing...”

“What is it?”

“You have quite a gap in your résumé...”

“Is that a problem?”

“Uh, I’m seeing here a five-hundred-year period of inactivity... Is that accurate? You didn’t mean to write five years?”

“Indeed, it was five hundred years, no question. No need to worry; not a day of that was blank from my point of view.”

Veltol was very confident that he had demonstrated his worth perfectly.

“Well then, Mr. Veltol.”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to...reject your application.”

“Why?!”

Veltol stood up from his chair and approached the interviewer.

He had done everything within his power to be as appealing as possible. This

couldn't be.

"Taking your résumé into account...as well as our interview just now... I'm terribly sorry, but...hiring you would be a bit, well, difficult... Moreover—"

"Moreover?"

"We do not hire people without a Familia."



"H-hey, Machina."

"Yes, Lord Veltol?"

"Could it be that—hypothetically speaking, of course, as you know I don't think this at all myself, but..."

"What is it?"

"Could it be that I'm utterly useless in this new era...?"

Veltol had six more interviews and failed at every single one of them. He was now lying with his head on Machina's lap, depressed as never before.

The self-esteem, ego, and dignity as a king that had kept him afloat for so long were torn to bits after mere hours of job hunting.

Veltol was sure of his talents and knew that he could perform any regular job as easily as grabbing a kobold by the tail. Even though civilization had progressed so quickly and jobs were now more complex than they were in his heyday, he was nonetheless confident that he'd be quick to adapt. But there was no point in adapting if no one let him take a crack at the job in the first place.

He felt humiliated.

Machina had come home from work early, worried about him.

It was four o'clock. Still a tad too soon for the sun to set.

"I've lost all confidence..."

"Lord Veltol, please don't be so hard on yourself! These puny, foolish mortals can't possibly comprehend your greatness! You can't expect them to recognize quality even if it hit them in the face!"

“Y-yes... You might be right...”

“Of course I’m right! I can assure you of that!”

“R-right...”

“Besides, you’re far and away the greatest of all! You, bending the knee to someone else? That’s no different from a slime owning an elder dragon as a pet! You aren’t yet accustomed to this new world. I think you should stay here and rest a bit longer.”

“I can’t just do that... Machina, do you know anyone from this world who could help?”

Veltol stuck to his resolve. Machina furrowed her brows in thought.

“Mm, I do have someone in mind,” she muttered. “Yes...she’s not always the most helpful, but she’s very wise. I think we can ask her for a helping hand.”

“My, that’s high praise, coming from you. But more than anything, I’m relieved to hear you have friends in this world. I know you tend to keep your distance.”

“I’m not quite sure we’re what you’d call friends... We just go shopping or eat out together from time to time, or sometimes we hang out and I’ll spend the night at her place, but that’s it.”

“That...certainly sounds like someone you’d call a friend...”

“I suppose that’s one way to look at it. Give me a moment.” Machina sent her acquaintance a message through the Familia. “I asked her to meet us at a nearby café. She should be heading there soon, but let’s go now so we can get a coffee and take a little break.”

Machina and Veltol made their way to a restaurant that was somewhere in between a café and a bar, very close to her house. It had a relaxing ambiance—rare for that part of town. They opened the old doors, made of now precious wood, and a bell rang as they entered. The inside was quite cramped, with just a single two-person table and four seats at the counter.

Relaxing orcish jazz was playing.

There were only two patrons inside: a pair of dog therians wearing hunting

caps. They turned to look at Veltol and Machina as they entered but immediately averted their gaze.

Behind the counter was the owner, a sleepy-looking orc nearing old age and smoking a cigarette. He glanced at Machina with a listless expression and raised a hand slightly.

“Hey, Machina.”

“Good afternoon, sir. How are you feeling today?”

“Not half bad. What a surprise seeing you here with someone other than the usual doofus.”

“Y-yes, for now.”

They took the two middle seats at the counter.

The smell of alcohol and the faint aroma of coffee filled the café.

“What should we have?” said Machina.

“Let’s go with two coffees,” replied Veltol.

The owner got right to their order.

“Here you go.” He put both cups in front of them.

This particular café didn’t serve pure coffee. Coffee beans were rare, so they used synthetic coffee powder, made to resemble the original’s taste and smell.

Machina and Veltol drank their coffee while enjoying the music and relaxing atmosphere.

Once their cups had cooled down slightly...

“Heya! Sorry I’m late!”

...the door burst open, and an Asian girl rushed in.

“Huh?”

“Hmm?”

Veltol and the girl exchanged glances. They recognized each other’s faces.

“Ah! You’re that guy!”

“You’re from the other day...”

Black hair with a red streak, a dwarven jacket and qipao, plus the sunglasses on her head—she was none other than the aether hacker Veltol met on his first day after being resurrected.

Machina stared at them and asked hesitantly, “Excuse me, do you two know each other?”

“Yes, I met her recently.”

“Yep. He was kinda hitting on me.”

“What?! Lord Veltol?!”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We were simply talking.”

“Hee-hee. Wow, guess the rumors were true—you really are the Demon Lord from way back. Ah, I’m Takahashi. Nice to meetcha...though I guess we already did, huh?”

Takahashi took the empty seat next to Veltol and amiably tapped his shoulder with a friendly smile on her face.

“Hey, Takahashi! Don’t be so rude!” Machina chided.

“No, it’s fine. I’m supposed to be asking her for help, after all,” said Veltol. “Pleasure to meet you, Takahashi.”

“If you could please mind your manners...,” Machina added.

“Hey, the friend of my friend is another one of my friends, y’know. Pleasure’s all mine, Velly.”

“Taaakaaahaaashiii!” Machina yelled, visibly upset.

It so happened that *Velly* was the legendary Demon Lord’s nickname on the aethernet.

Machina wasn’t normally this emotive with others as far as Veltol was aware.



He was pleased and relieved to see such a healthy friendship. He realized Machina hadn't been alone in this world after all.

"How did you two get to know each other?" he asked.

"Mm? The net," Takashi replied.

"Don't you dare say anything out of line, Takahashi," Machina warned.

"Relax, Machina. It's all right. Well, Takahashi?"

"Uh-huh. We first met on a Demon Lord *doujin* forum—"

"*Doujin*?"

"Sorry, forget about that part. Anyway, we first met in a chatroom for people who're into, uh, creative endeavors. Machina's the most senior member there, and we hit it off. We both live here in Shinjuku, so we met up offline and then became real-life friends."

"T-true... That's more or less accurate."

"Oh, by the way, Velly, I already know you and Machina are immortals. No worries, though. I'm from the postwar generation, so I'm totally against immortal hunting, plus I'm already friends with Machina. I'm no bigot."

"You don't need to say all that!" Machina cried.

The two of them exchanged friendly banter, which brought a slight smile to Veltol's face—their friendship broke down barriers between mortals and immortals.

"So, Velly, I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but uh...you're a man, right? You gotta be, yeah?"

"Of course I am."

Takahashi sized him up from head to toe. "Yeah, I guess so. Although you're pretty enough to look like a woman with just a li'l makeup..."

"Why do you ask?" said Veltol.

"Wellll, it's just that the Demon Lord Veltol is as popular on this island as Oda Nobunaga, the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven, so people like to depict you as

a woman in these, uh, creative endeavors quite often. Actually, more folks believe you're a woman these days."

"Oh."

"There's all these records of you being beautiful and long-haired, so that's where the theories come from."

"Is that true?" he asked Machina.

"Yes... Well... Such theories do exist...and many do believe them. Indeed. But I always offer a rebuttal to resolve such misunderstandings. I've written three hundred gigabytes worth of material on the subject."

"Wow, freaky much? Anyways, she told me how 'Lord Veltol's gonna be revived soon!' But I had my doubts up until I saw you with my own eyes. I believe it now, just from your looks and your whole vibe. And besides, I gotta trust Machina on this one."

"And who was it who still insisted, 'No way, lady! Veltol's totally my headcanon!'"

"I mean, that's *way* more fun, though!" Takahashi said as she scratched the back of her head. Veltol caught a glimpse of the black metal Familia on her nape.

"Pardon me for a moment, Takahashi," he said.

"Bwuh?"

Veltol reached out and touched it. From the outside, it looked as if he were trying to hug her.

"Hmm..."

"W-wait, Velly! Uh, Veltol, sir?! Machina, help me out here! What's going on?!"

"H-he did that to me, too!"

"Huh?"

Machina stared dead-eyed at Takahashi, who could clearly see her friend's gaze burning with jealousy.

“And he did it to me first!” Machina added.

“Gah, you big dummy! That’s not the problem here! C’mon, Velly! What are you—?”

Veltol unhande the already frozen-up Takahashi.

“Sorry for the insolence. Your Familia is different from Machina’s, so it caught my attention. I was looking for differences in its operation and structure.”

Veltol was correct: Takahashi’s Familia had a different shape from Machina’s. The original developer, IHMI, had the top spot in Familia sales, but other companies sold their own, too. Shape and performance varied between individual manufacturers.

“Well, yeah, mine definitely outperforms Machina’s. Wait—by ‘looking for,’ you mean... You were analyzing it? You can do that?”

It was a natural question. Normally, special knowledge and equipment was needed to analyze a magi-gadget’s function and structure. No one could understand the technics that comprised magic through mere observation or touch.

No one had been able to analyze ancient magi-gadgets even at a superficial level—of course a magimachine full of trade secrets with encrypted technics would be no different.

From Takahashi’s point of view, what Veltol had just said was no more than lunacy or a really bad joke. It would be more understandable for it to have been a simple excuse for harassing her.

Machina noticed Takahashi staring at Veltol like he’d lost his mind, so she rushed in to explain:

“It’s Sage Eyes.”

“The what now?” Takahashi asked.

“Do you know about special abilities?”

“Ohhh, like Heavenly Sword’s Gift or Sixth Sense? I thought those were invented for fanfic. So they’re real?”

“What Lord Veltol just used, Sage Eyes, was one of those special abilities. He can feel the movements of what he touches through the flow of mana. It’s all thanks to his extremely high sensitivity to aether and mana.”

“High sensitivity, eh? So *that’s* how he noticed my hacking that one time.” Takahashi eyed him suspiciously.

“These magimachines seem to be different from regular magi-gadgets,” Veltol explained. “Nonetheless, I was able to get a general, albeit shallow grasp of what goes on inside your Familias. I have to hand it to Marcus—I can’t entirely figure this machine out.”

Veltol was able to get an overall sense of the Familia’s basic structure and its operation. First, there was a nerve connector, which, as the name suggested, connected the machine to the user’s spinal cord via artificial nerves. Then there was the protective cover, which guarded the connector from dirt, sweat, and sebum, as well as any external impact. Last came the main body, the Familia itself—the processor. These three features were collectively referred to as the Familia.

Veltol only understood that the base program (or technic) powering the Familia—something common among all modern magi-gadgets—was made up of a code. That code, or spell, was an intricate, complex form of composite magic. He couldn’t comprehend what function the technic at the Familia’s core served.

“Yeah, engineers all over the world would go crazy if you could analyze the whole thing just by touching the quantum core,” said Takahashi.

“What’s that?”

“The quantum processor. That’s where the base program’s calculations occur using quantum superposition. It’s the most important part—what makes the Familia tick.”

“...What does any of that mean?”

“I’m no expert, so not even I totally get it myself. But in real simple terms: The quantum core’s job is to observe, calculate, and demonstrate via quantum physics and maginformatics a situation where both sides of a coin exist at the

same time.”

“Both sides of a coin...superposed...” Veltol pondered this with a serious expression while putting a finger to his mouth.

“But anyways, this isn’t why you called me, right?”

“Ah, right.” Veltol had to do away with the thoughts still welling up in his mind.

“I called you because I want you to find Lord Veltol a job,” said Machina.

“A job? Just go to the Commerce Guild, then.”

“That’s what I did. My résumé and interviews were *perfect*, but they turned me down just because I don’t have a Familia.”

“What?! You don’t?!”

“Due to various circumstances, yes. I can’t get one.”

“Woow. Aw man, that’s gonna be tricky. You need a Familia for pretty much everything nowadays. Without one, you’re real short on job options.”

A sense of gloom swirled in Veltol’s chest after hearing the answer he feared. This wasn’t an issue of money or time—he simply could not acquire a Familia.

“It’s not just a convenient communications device—it seriously functions as proof of citizenship. Like, people without Familias in Shinjuku basically have no rights,” said Takahashi. “Job applications don’t list a Familia as a requirement out of consideration for folks who can’t get one for physical or religious reasons, but it’s basically an unwritten rule that you gotta have one. And getting a citizen ID is that much tougher since it’s a huge pain in the butt to sync an ID without a Familia. Not to mention all the other governmental or medical services you won’t be able to sync...”

“So there’s nothing I can do?”

“Wellll... You don’t seem like the kinda guy to work under someone else, Velly.”

“Yes, I agree,” Machina interjected.

“Got anything specific in mind?” Takahashi asked the Demon Lord.

“Hmm... I want as many people as possible to know who I am. That would increase faith in me, which would bring back the power I’ve lost.”

“So you wanna be famous. Okay, then crossing off any education, experience, or a Familia... Your best bet would be something aethernet related—something that doesn’t use a Familia, of course. You’d get popular for sure... Plus, you’ve got a pretty face and a nice voice...but obviously you’ve never played video games... No, hold up. We could use that as a selling point. Yeah, you could be a...”



“Good evemortal! How’s the pain of life treating you mortals today? It is I, the Demon Lord Veltol Velvet Velsvalt.”

On the desk was a bottle of mineral water and an aethernet-enabled tablet that projected two holographic screens: a video game and a livestream chat. Connected to the PDA was a webcam, mic, and game controller.

Veltol was sitting in a gaming chair, wearing the all-black tracksuit Machina had bought for him, along with a white T-shirt underneath with the words *Demon Lord* printed on it in Japanese. The jacket was unzipped so as to show the design.

“The time has come to continue our journey through *Bloody Spirits 3*. Today will probably be our last stream...but who knows? It’s a hard game, so we must stay sharp until the very end. Join me on this epic quest!”

He grabbed the controller and started the game.

The graphics were gorgeous—almost indistinguishable from real life.

Veltol moved his on-screen armored character and recalled his conversation with Takahashi three months before.

“You could be a livestreamer.”

“Live...streamer?”

“Yeah, they broadcast videos of them just, like, playing games or chatting or even singing. I guess there’s others, but I only watch video game streamers. They get money through advertisements and donations. The popular ones are

pretty much celebrities.”

“Mm-hmm. I can’t say I understand it, but is this something I could do?”

“Totally, it’s super easy. I’ll give you my old computer and all the gear I don’t use, and you can buy newer stuff once you start earning numbers—”

“I cannot allow this!”

“M-Machina?”

“I can’t let Lord Veltol work such a risky and unstable job—it’s not even a real job in the first place! He should have a steady, reliable source of income!”

“Whaaat? C’mon, Machina, get with the times. It’s not like any job’s stable in this day and age anyways. I mean, sure, there’s work out there that’s at least a bit more reliable, but Velly’s got a great voice and a pretty face, and also, like, something I can’t quite pin down... His aura, I guess? You’ll see—he’s gonna be a star!”

“W-well, I can’t argue with that...but still...”

“A li’l streaming income will help pad your bank account, Machina. He won’t be able to play those full-immersion games that are hot right now, but he can stream older games without a Familia no problem. And most of all, livestreaming is part of aethernet culture, and being an entertainer is a perfectly upstanding job.”

“U-um... What do you think, Lord Veltol?”

“It’s true that I have no options, plain and simple. Let’s go with Takahashi’s proposal. She’s your friend, and that’s more than enough reason to trust her.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh. Take it from a freak like me who spends twenty-four hours a day on the net watching multiple streams on different windows: I just know Velly’s got what it takes to shine brighter than a diamond. Leave this to me; with his talents, we’ll have results in three months.”

And sure enough, three months later, they had results.

Veltol had amassed a million followers in such a short time, with live viewers averaging at around a hundred thousand per stream. He rapidly became one of the most popular up-and-coming streamers on the aethernet.

He put on full display the charisma he'd honed managing an entire country and leading an army across the world as the Demon Lord. The masses were fascinated by his every movement and bewitched by his voice.

What brought him the most attention was that he kept his webcam turned on instead of using an avatar. Given how commonplace Familias had become, almost all aethernet denizens used avatars, and livestreams normally involved what was called full-dive theatrical streaming where people played as virtual avatars they'd either bought or created themselves.

As such, no one streamed using their real faces anymore—except for Veltol. This anachronism, paired with his beautiful looks and sloppy skills at analogue games, made the Demon Lord a huge hit.

His main demographic was women, although he still maintained a strong male following. And his audience kept on growing.

Of course, this achievement was not Veltol's alone. His popularity might have come from his charisma, but what really kickstarted his fame was Takahashi's skill as a producer. She promoted him through her many connections. She thought anyone who gave him a chance would be hooked, and it turned out she was right.

Having him stream using his real name and Demon Lord title was also Takahashi's idea. According to her: "If there was a streamer who called himself Oda Nobunaga and he looked exactly like official descriptions of the guy—that'd grab people's attention, right? So let's do just that!"

"LET'S GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Veltol's victory cry echoed through the small room.

After five hours of gameplay and a total of seventy-two attempts, Veltol's character finally defeated the gigantic demon lord.

The credits rolled on one screen, while the live comment feed popped up on the other:

CONGRATS!

STFU

HE'S GONNA PIN U TO THE WALL AGAIN

THE DEMON LORD OWNS!

BS3 TAUGHT HIM HOW TO LIVE

DUDE'S GOT GOD-TIER LOOKS AND VOCALS AND ENDURANCE

Most of the comments were in elvish, though languages from many species and countries (the term *countries* being used only as a way to describe what they once were) were there as well—either due to remaining tribalism from before the wars or simple proof of civilizations standing the test of time.

“Ahhh... This catharsis after defeating a strong opponent—now *this* is the good part...”

Veltol put down the controller and leaned back in his chair.

Aside from comments, the window also showed amounts in various currencies—Shinjuku yen, Yokohama yen, dollars, thermus, and more. Those were tips. Donations.

These tips were immediately transferred to Machina’s bank account once the platform’s commission fee was deducted.

“Big thank you for the tips. As always, you didn’t have to bother. I’ll be sure to spend it on some delicious udon.”

This was the Demon Lord Veltol’s current source of income.

He couldn’t believe this was an actual job when he first started—getting money just for broadcasting himself on the aethernet playing games and chatting? But Takahashi explained that the fans were overjoyed just knowing that their money was used as nourishment for their favorite entertainer, and now he gratefully accepted it.

He also received money from advertisements based on his number of views, and he had even started selling merchandise like the Demon Lord T-shirts he wore.

And on top of that, his fans’ donations were clearly contributing to his positive faith.

“I’ve gotta say, *BS3* was quite intense. I thought I’d improved after the first two games, but this one truly took me by surprise. Really though, as soon as I started *BS1*, I knew this wasn’t the kind of game a beginner should be playing. I’m sure many of you were stressed out just watching me die at every turn. Hmm? You thought that was funny? You liked how I got angry at the game? Ridiculous. If I were truly upset, you’d see the earth trembling and hear the aether screaming.”

Veltol spoke elvish during his streams, although he didn’t like it. No one understood Elderish, and only a few users had a translator plug-in installed.

Just then, there was suspicious activity in the comments. First there were the more direct insults—*KYS*, *BORING AF*, *ET CETERA*—and then multiple nonsensical character strings appeared.

Oh, there it is again.

Naturally, with his sudden success came people who envied and hated him. Put simply: haters. They were fools going against the king, but Veltol tolerated it. Their anger and hatred became negative faith.

Veltol knew it was best for streamers to keep their distance from such people, but nonetheless—rather, because of that—he decided to feed the trolls and pit his fans against the haters. The resulting synergy intensified each side’s feelings for him, which exponentially increased his faith.

Takahashi had told him that it felt too sneaky for the Demon Lord to be doing that, but Veltol wasn’t one to worry about the means. He simply took advantage of the current era and transformed the aethernet into a faith machine.

His scheme was a success. Although he hadn’t obtained the kind of power he’d had all those centuries ago, he was significantly stronger than he had been before his streaming career took off.

“Now then, that’s about enough for today. A huge thank you to everyone who followed me through this series from the very beginning. A smaller thank you to those who joined partway through. Don’t forget to like and subscribe! I haven’t thought about what I’ll be playing next, so I guess we’ll decide that in the chat during our next session. Until then—a swift and peaceful death to you fools.”

He tapped the holographic screen to close the streaming app, then turned the PDA off.

Despite how widespread Familia had become, physical computers like this PDA still existed, and there was a demand for them.

“Haaah...,” Veltol sighed and leaned back in the chair. “The aethernet, eh?”

He looked at the PDA and took a sip of water—some much-needed hydration after all that talking.

“What a revolutionary concept, where all sorts of people can share their thoughts anytime, anywhere. The spread of information has really come a long way from my days as king. Fascinating. But this only furthers the ignorant masses and snuffs out the outstanding individuals. And as those individuals continue to assimilate, their potential decreases. They grow weak and lose their independence. Free will cannot be controlled, but once given the chaos of freedom, humankind succumbs to sloth and malice—their value plummets, then disappears. Their unified consciousness approaches rock bottom. It does not average out. It merely keeps on falling.”

What I mean is...

“This world is so perfectly convenient for me,” he said as he turned around. “Right, Machi—?”

What he saw there was Machina wrapped in a towel, having just finished her after-work bath.

“...”

She was in her own little world, not noticing Veltol at all. She took a can of orange soda from the fridge, cracked it open, and brought it to her mouth, then put a hand on one hip and downed the can’s contents.

“Phew!” Machina wiped her mouth with her arm, let out a deep breath...and then her eyes met Veltol’s. “Eek!”

She quickly got changed, then came back and shyly met Veltol’s eyes.

“I-I’m so sorry... I lived alone for so long, and once I get relaxed I...start acting like I used to...”

“Oh, so you always did that when you lived alone?”

“Uh... Ah... Well... I have nothing to say in my defense...”

“Bwa-ha-ha! Fine, fine. It’s part of your charm.”

“Th-thank you... Just living the two us of together is like a dream come true...”



“Hmm? Did you say something?”

“N-no, nothing at all! Come to think of it, Lord Veltol, I got a call from a delivery person. Apparently you have a package at the collection hub.”

“Yes, I ordered a new mic. I can’t exactly compete with full-dive streaming quality, but compromise isn’t an option, either. I require the best video and sound quality possible. I’ll go get it.”

“You don’t have to do that, my lord. I’ll go.”

“No, it’s fine. I need to get myself moving after being seated for so long.”

“Understood. I’ll get dinner started, then.”

Machina smiled gleefully while Veltol put on his fur coat at the entrance. Machina had bought it for him recently, and he enchanted it with cold-resistant magic. The coat was all he needed to stay comfortable outside.

A quality piece of magical armor, it was also blade and magic resistant, and it automatically cleaned and repaired itself from simple frays and stains. The enchantments were quite high level, which was bigger proof than anything that Veltol had amassed a decent amount of faith.

A similar product would cost as much as the average Shinjuku worker’s annual income, although there was no use selling this particular coat since it only reacted to Veltol’s mana.

His breath came out in white puffs as he looked up to the sky. It was covered in thick clouds, the surroundings dark like the evening despite it still being daytime.

“Cloudy as always. And just as filthy, too,” he whispered.

The skies and streets of Outer Shinjuku lacked the vibrancy that was characteristic of Inner Shinjuku. Red rust and white smoke, pipes protruding everywhere, flickering aether neon, a scant few drones and flying vehicles in the air as well as people and automobiles on the ground.

And yet it was still livelier than the city’s outskirts. Veltol didn’t hate this hollow, filthy section of Outer Shinjuku.

“This area is hardly glamorous.”

Veltol entered a winding alleyway. He didn’t usually take this route, but he thought it might be a shortcut to the collection hub.

It was dark, silent, and dank. Like the shadow within Outer Shinjuku’s already desolate shadow. A part of Shinjuku usually gone unseen—the Outer Shinjuku slums.

The concrete walls were cracked, the houses short, and the air stank of cigarettes and alcohol and sewers and vomit. A constellation of cables connected the illegal buildings decorated with dirty posters while the people hurriedly crossed the streets.

There were many seedy open-air shops in the narrow streets, most of which presented their tagged goods on top of blue tarps. One particular shop offered bottles with yellow liquid and some sort of larvae, dried fairies, “stones” that most certainly were eyeballs, and other strange objects. The one next to it had boxes full of plugs, cables, and old storage media from who knows where.

Once Veltol left the area, he saw even more vagabonds on the streets.

Outer Shinjuku was still inside the cryotolerance zone, but it was much colder than in Inner Shinjuku. The street urchins nonetheless did what they could to survive even then, covering themselves with filthy blankets—in a sense, they were the polar opposite of immortals like Veltol.

Many of them didn’t have the finances to get a Familia, which prevented them from finding employment, and that only made them poorer. It was a vicious cycle.

Postwar neoliberalist thought had taken deep roots in Shinjuku’s politics, and so the poor received no governmental assistance. A few support groups had been established looking to break the cycle, but there was no chance of adequate aid reaching all of the needy. There were too many of them.

“I suppose you’d call them the crooked dregs of Shinjuku society...”

It was then that Veltol noticed something—and not by chance. It was no miracle that he recognized this person among the dozens of vagabonds.

“...!”

Veltol gasped when he saw him. This person couldn't be here—there was no way.

The man wore a tattered blue cloak and old military armor under it. His blond hair hadn't been groomed in days. He was holding an unsheathed, terribly rusty sword as support.

This was but one of the many vagabonds in the city. And yet, there was no mistaking him. Veltol knew this man. Even after five hundred years—even though he looked like a decaying blade—he was instantly recognizable.

The last mortal Veltol saw before disappearing five hundred years earlier. The one who had defeated him. Humanity's shining hope...

“...Gram.”

The Demon Lord Veltol's bitter, fated, sworn enemy—the Hero Gram.

CHAPTER THREE

The Immortal Furnace

The Hero Gram was of ordinary birth.

He was raised by his parents with his twin sister in a small village near the border of the Ohm Kingdom, on the western side of Alnaeth.

When he was fifteen, he trekked to the caverns in the mountains to look for an herb to cure his sister's fever. During his absence, one of the Six Dark Peers, Zenol, decided to lead his Order of the Karmic Sword to Gram's village. They burned it down out of fear for the Hero of prophecy.

Having lost his family and home, Gram was taken in by Althia the Paladin, who would later become his teacher before he set out on his journey to defeat the Demon Lord.

That was the basic gist of the story of the Selfless Hero, the Shining Brave, the Sun That Never Sets. His monikers were plenty, for his name was known throughout the entire continent.

And yet, his achievements were now no more than legend.

Veltol invited Gram to join him for some udon at a stall on the main street.

The orc cook drained the udon from behind the red curtain and paper lanterns.

The war between mortals and immortals and the battle between Hero and Demon Lord was a very, very long time ago for Gram, and although it was still something recent from Veltol's point of view, he also viewed it as a thing of the past. There was no reason for them to kill each other in this era—and so, the Demon Lord had very naturally approached the Hero and invited him for lunch. Gram silently obliged.

Veltol took a glance at Gram sitting beside him. He was lifeless; his lips were

chapped, his eyes dim, and his hair appeared damaged.

A far cry from the Hero Veltol remembered.

On his nape was a Familia, slightly bigger than others. Unbeknownst to Veltol, it was an old military-issue Familia—proof of his time in the army.

He then looked at Gram's rusty sword, placed beside his chair: the symbol of Gram's legendary exploits, the mythic armament of legend—the Holy Sword, Ixasorde. The Unwavering Silver Sun that never rusted, never broke, never faded.

Nothing remained of that sun-like shine of the immortal slayer. It was now rusty, smashed, chipped—it had turned into more a staff than a sword, and it was unceremoniously resting on the ground.

The Holy Sword perfectly reflected its owner's state. For it to be rusty meant that the Hero's heart was equally rusted. And as proof of this, Veltol saw no gleam of the dazzling light that shone brighter than even the sword itself, which he had seen in Gram's eyes five centuries prior.

His eyes now seemed broken, resigned, despairing—as if he had given up. Those were the eyes of the defeated.

Veltol couldn't bear to look him in the eye. He couldn't bear to see his eyes even more decayed than the Holy Sword of legend.

Gram was like a mirror. Veltol was sure that he himself had looked just as hollow until only recently.

As if void of life's little glimmers...

Ridiculous. Veltol stopped thinking about it.

"Machina's taken me to plenty of udon places, but this one's the best I've found. Enjoy it. It has my seal of approval," he told Gram.

There was no need for Veltol to show concern, and yet he couldn't help himself.

"Okay," Gram replied.

"..."

“...”

“Really, though, food has gotten much tastier from my time. I thought it would take a while for my palate to adapt, but to my surprise, that wasn’t the case.”

“Yeah.”

“.....”

“.....”

Awkward silence.

The obvious outcome of having these polar opposites—human and darkling, mortal and immortal, Hero and Demon Lord—sitting side by side at an udon joint.

Why am I having such a hard time striking up a conversation? He was much more easygoing and approachable five hundred years ago... Perhaps I ought to do more “just chatting” streams to improve my small talk skills...

Two steaming bowls of kitsune udon were placed in front of Veltol as he brooded over the subject.

“Two kitsune udon, comin’ right up.”

It was a traditional dish of thin noodles, two sheets of fried soybeans, chopped scallion, and a single mernius.

The Hero and Demon Lord grabbed their chopsticks and spoons and started slurping.

Veltol’s chopstick skills had improved significantly in these three months.

“So good,” said Gram. “It’s been ages since I had decent food...”

Veltol couldn’t say anything in response. They kept on eating in silence.

After a while, Gram finally put his chopsticks on top of the bowl and said, “This feels kinda weird.”

“What does?”

Gram’s voice sounded empty and hollow, like dried, cracked, barren earth.

“Here I am, eating udon alongside the guy who killed my parents, my sister, and my friends. I never would’ve thought this day would come.”

Veltol couldn’t tell whether Gram was being sincere or facetious. But it was only natural for him to say that—not even Veltol would’ve imagined this happening, not in a million...or five hundred years.

Veltol had lost his immortal retainers. People who were important to him.

He had undoubtedly despised the Hero five centuries before, but now, he didn’t feel the slightest anger looking at Gram.

More than anything, he had one question:

Why is he here?

Veltol couldn’t stop thinking about it as he shoveled udon into his mouth. He couldn’t get the question off his mind, not since he saw Gram here in this world.

And of course Gram would find this situation odd. This reunion after five hundred years shouldn’t be possible. Not with a mortal. So Veltol asked:

“Gram, have you turned immortal?”

“...”

He didn’t answer.

“You told me that life is brilliant because of its limitations—that you mortals are strong because you fight to survive. And that is why you defeated me.”

“...”

“So why...? Why?”

He felt some indescribable emotion in his chest, like a mix between anger, sadness, and disappointment.

“Not exactly, Veltol. I’m not an immortal,” Gram replied, denying those very emotions.

“...What?”

“After I defeated you, one of the Six Great Gods of Alnaeth, the goddess Meldia, bestowed me with eternal youth as a reward.”

“Eternal youth...?”

Being immortal implied having eternal youth, but not the other way around.

Veltol could hardly imagine the goddess Meldia would be so foolish as to bless the great Hero with eternal youth. She was far too easily charmed, too deeply jealous. She coveted beauty and scorned old age.

Gram gazed at his reflection in the bowl of soup and spoke effortlessly:

“With the Demon Lord gone, soon the next war began. One that I already expected: a war between mortals. I, the Ohm Kingdom’s hero, was sent to fight against the neighboring countries. Makes you laugh, doesn’t it? The war against the immortals finally ends, and we mortals immediately start killing one another. It’s downright comical... And so I killed many of my people for the sake of my country.”

His words were tinged with gloom and despair.

“We kept on winning battles and annexing countries, expanding Ohm farther and farther, until finally it was me—the Hero—who’d become the next obstacle.”

It was the same conclusion Veltol had reach five hundred years before: The one to be rejected after the Demon Lord’s defeat would be the Hero.

“I’d been powerful enough to defeat the Demon Lord, so political leaders started turning on me. They stoked fear among the masses, who then had me exiled. There was no longer any need for a hero. No one wants one anymore. The Hero no longer exists.”

Foolish, Veltol thought. Not of Gram, of course, but of the political leaders.

It was inevitable that the people would fear him. The masses were, by nature, foolish and weak. It’s why they needed strong leadership.

Veltol also pitied Gram having to serve a king who couldn’t handle a Hero. Had this ruler served under Veltol, he would have never committed such a foolish mistake.

“I wandered the globe, then the Fantasion came, and I fought in the First City War as a mercenary. I also took part in the Immortal Hunt afterward. I killed

many of your kind, too. I fought for my own sense of justice, and now look at me. I finally realized that you and I—mortals and immortals—are no different after all.”

Gram sighed deeply, as though expelling everything he had built up inside over the past five hundred years.

“I’ve killed too many people, both mortals and immortals... There’s no place for me in a world that doesn’t need a hero. This world has no hero. I’m just so... tired...”

His *raison d’être* denied, his dignity trampled, Gram had become disillusioned with the world. Yet he couldn’t succumb completely into despair nor die. He kept on living aimlessly like a recluse, simply *existing*.

This world had cast the Demon Lord aside and deemed the Hero unnecessary. Despite their incongruity, the pair felt a shared sympathy.

Still, Veltol didn’t offer any appreciation or compassion for Gram’s hardships. Such words were unneeded between them.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Silence reigned once again.

Then came the sound of a spoon hitting a bowl.

“Listen, Veltol,” Gram said, breaking the silence.

“Hmm?”

“There’s something I want to ask you.”

“What’s that?”

“Why did you decide to take over the world?”

The Demon Lord’s answer was emphatic:

“So that it could be peaceful.”

His words were certain. At his core, Veltol held sincere, heartfelt conviction.

“.....What?” Gram honestly could not comprehend this answer. He repeated

it back to Veltol: "...So that the world could be peaceful?"

He was clearly confused.

He never would've thought such words would come out of the Demon Lord's mouth, but they didn't seem like lies or jest. They were serious, honest, sincere.

Veltol continued:

"There are many ways to become immortal. Phoenixes, vampires, ancient disease, curses, the pursuit of magic, divine punishment... Leaving aside some rare exceptions, all immortals were once mortals, no different from regular people. Mortals call us darklings out of fear, but we are no different at the core."

"..."

"Mortals are weak. That's why they fear and envy and persecute us immortals."

"But immortals do the same thing. They look down on mortals. They hate us and oppose us."

"That's right. Because mortals are not the only weak ones—immortals are weak, too. And the weak fear and reject that which they don't understand. That's how all people—all living creatures are."

"...That's—that's not true. It can't be..."

"There must be someone strong at the top so the weak don't cause conflict. And that's where I come in. That is my duty as a strong being."

Veltol admitted it was ridiculous of him to say he was strong in his current state. He was aware of how arrogant he sounded, something that he had never felt before.

"That is my ideal of world peace."

"Peace through domination isn't—"

"You experienced it yourself—the betrayal and rejection the weak are capable of."

"...Even so... Even so, I..." Gram cast his eyes down, then spoke firmly: "I want

to believe in people. I want to continue being an ally for the weak. After all...I know the light that shines from within that weakness.”

Veltol averted his gaze. He couldn’t stand looking at Gram’s face—at those eyes.

Both of their conflicting reasonings were too overblown to be righteous. They couldn’t find a compromise, and so silence was all that remained.

Veltol couldn’t understand how he was still willing to see eye to eye with humankind, to adhere to that weakness he spoke of even after having been betrayed.

“Seems like we really can’t come to an agreement, Veltol.”

“Ha! We’ve known that for five hundred years.”

Gram placed his chopsticks on top of his bowl, grabbed his sword, and stood up. “Thanks for the meal. The udon was really good. I’m glad we were able to talk, Veltol.”

“As am I, Gram.”

Veltol didn’t watch him go. He just listened as the Hero departed.

“This world has no Hero? You idiot,” Veltol whispered bitterly. “My very existence proves how wrong you are.”

Veltol and Gram were opposite sides of a coin, like light and dark, sun and moon, life and death. The paradox of the Hero and Demon Lord was what made their relationship.

“That’s not what we agreed on!”

A woman’s voice echoed through the backstreet just as Veltol was leaving the shop, having paid for the udon with his PDA.

He recognized that voice. There was also another, lower voice of a man. It sounded like an argument.

Quarrels weren’t uncommon in this city. Veltol had witnessed several heated arguments end in murder. Usually, he wouldn’t care either way, but he couldn’t ignore it this time considering he knew one of the people arguing.

He followed the voice to an even narrower alleyway. That was where he found Takahashi.

She was visibly upset, shouting at the ogre man in front of her. Takahashi was small even for a human her age, and she looked even tinier when compared to the ogre.

“You’re gonna have to pay me double if it’s the yakuza we’re dealin’ with, Bunny Bones.”

“What, you’re chickening out?”

“Hell no. I’m talkin’ business here. You feel me?”

“Grrr...!”

The ogre spoke with a grin, while Takahashi flailed her arms in anger.

Veltol recognized the ogre as well. The cheap prosthetic arm, the tank top and cargo pants, the mohawk—he was the ogre who’d given Veltol a beating after he lost to Marcus.

“Quit trying to jack up the cost right before the job even starts!” Takahashi yelled. “We have a contract!”

“Well, I changed my mind. I’ll be risking my life, so I’ve gotta get something appropriate in return. If you’re not cool with that, then look for someone else. If you can find anyone, that is.”

“You can’t even keep a written agreement?!”

“Written agreement? This ain’t exactly respectable work we’re doin’ here. How’re you gonna sue me for that, huh?”

“Stupid freakin’ bogeyman! You’re all bulk and no brains! Bet you don’t have any balls, either, you wimpy ogre. Aww, poor widdle bogeybaby.”

“The fuck did you just say to me, you goddamn hairless monkey? I’m gonna smash your fucking ape skull in!”

They threw slurs at each other, the resulting sparks enough to ignite a real fight at any moment. The ogre obviously wasn’t backing down, but Takahashi was fearless.

“Stop right there.”

“Huh? Velly?!”

“Eh?”

Veltol stepped forward and loudly interjected. He couldn't stand to see a big man trying to intimidate a small woman, even if it likely made no difference in modern society.

“The hell are you?” The ogre turned to him after hearing his voice. “Oh, you're the guy from that one time...”

“Stay away from her and I'll let you go.”

“Eh? You know Bunny Bones?”

“Bunny Bones? So what if I do?”

Veltol looked straight at the ogre, provoking him with a menacing glare.

“Hey, pip-squeak, don't you remember how I bashed your brains in? Man, seeing you puke your brains out was a real hoot! And I'm such a good guy, I didn't even post the footage on the aethernet.”

The ogre took the bait and slowly approached Veltol, all the while dishing out more insults:

“Fine with me! You're gonna regret tryin' to look good in front of this lady, you barfing shrimpy piece of trash... I'll take you out right here, right now.”

He tried to grab Veltol with his big prosthetic hand, dead set on killing the Demon Lord. His movements were fluid enough to make Veltol realize he was used to murder.

“Velly! Just run! Go!” Takahashi shouted.

Veltol didn't evade. He resisted the ogre's prosthesis and grabbed it back.

“Don't worry, Takahashi. It's time to test how much power I've gained from my million subscribers.”

“Ha! You idiot, my arm's strong enough to pluck yours out!” The ogre upped the prosthesis's power with his magic. “Time to say your prayers!”

Veltol's bones creaked. His skin burst, and blood spurted out. Had the ogre grabbed him by the head instead, it was clear only a bloody mess would've been left behind.

The ogre's prosthetic arm was made of an exposed reinforced carbon and composite eltonium steel frame—no bells or whistles, but top-notch output.

"I expected as much," said Veltol. Even with his arm crushed, he kept a cool and composed expression.

"Velly...!" Takahashi screamed in dismay.

And who could blame her? Someone without a Familia or prostheses could never defeat a magiborg ogre in a fight.

"Heh..." And yet, Veltol laughed.

A bluish-black light momentarily enveloped the Demon Lord.

The next instant, he gripped hard, and as easily as breaking a twig, he crushed the ogre's manipulator frames—essentially, the bones of his fingers.

"Aaaagh?!"

Lubricant and liquid aether gushed out as Veltol ripped the prosthesis off, artificial nerves and all.

Since the ogre had his arm's sensation settings on, his face twisted in agony.

Veltol didn't do anything special this time. He simply initialized his mana and circulated it throughout his body. Reinforcing one's body through mana manipulation was the most basic thing. Anyone could do it with enough training. However, only the Demon Lord, with his enormous mana capacity and output, could achieve it at this level.

Veltol extended his arm. His hand reached for the ogre's chest, his middle finger held by his thumb, and then he flicked it.

"Here."

That was it. A finger flick.

In the moment of impact, mana surged like bluish-black shock waves, and the ogre was blown against a concrete wall. He fell to the mountain of garbage bags

below.

“It seems he’s not quite a strong enough test subject for how much faith I’ve recovered.”

Veltol opened his hand. His injuries were already healed.

He didn’t spare the fainted ogre even a glance as Takahashi ran over.

“A-are you okay, Velly?!”

“As you can see, I’m perfectly fine. Are you injured?”

“Nah, I’m all right. Thanks.”

“Of course. It’s only natural to help a friend in need. By the way, what was that about Bunny Bones or something?”

“Ah, that’s my handle. So what’re you doing around here?”

“I came to pick up a delivery, but I ran into my sworn enemy—I mean, an old acquaintance—on my way there. After some chatting, I heard your voice.”

“Ooh, gotcha, gotcha. Hang on—hmm? An old acquaintance? Then that means—”

“Don’t worry about it. Moreover, what were *you* doing here? It looked like you were arguing with that dunce.” He pointed at the ogre with his chin.

“He’s, like, my bodyguard? Kinda? Anyways, he works for me, and we’ve got this big job today, but the bastard suddenly asked for double the pay, so I told him off. Actually, this dude’s no chump himself, and you took care of him in one blow...”

“I see... Wait—he was your bodyguard?”

The unconscious ogre was injured, to put it mildly. His prosthetic arm was also destroyed, so his days as a bodyguard were likely over.

“That’s, um... I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine! You seriously helped me out. But anywho... Velly, you’re, like, crazy strong, yeah?”

“I am the Demon Lord, after all... Ah, I see where this is going.”

“Yep. Wanna be my new bodyguard? I’ll pay you.”

He could go to the collection hub another day, and there was no reason to refuse his friend’s request. If anything, the only problem would be getting back before dinner, but that could be solved with just a call to Machina.

Veltol agreed to help.

Takahashi took him to a former warehouse in the old port, thirty minutes by flying taxi from the street they were in.

It used to be an important maritime transport spot in Shinjuku, but the area was sealed off after the port was destroyed during the City Wars.

The Shinjuku Ward didn’t face the ocean in the old world, but the current Shinjuku City had annexed the surrounding wards. This area was once Tokyo’s Minato Ward.

The neighboring cities were Yokohama on the sea at the south and Akihabara to the northeast.

The poorly constructed warehouses were badly eroded—hardly any were still recognizable.

Takahashi and Veltol headed to one that still looked vaguely like a building, although the walls made of shabby synthetic amidas lumber appeared close to collapsing.

“This whole area’s untouched. No one comes anywhere near here, so it attracts a rough crowd. Y’know, the broken glass theory or whatever,” Takahashi explained.

They observed the surroundings from the mountain of rubble in front of the warehouse. Its metal doors were shut, and two ogre men in black suits were standing outside guarding them. Near them were multiple luxury cars with adamantine armor and magical protection.

“So what should I do?” Veltol asked.

Takahashi’s eyes lit up. She grinned as if she’d been waiting for that exact question. It was honestly scary.

“You’re gonna steal something.”

“Aha.”

“Do kings steal? Or is theft a no go?”

Veltol smiled back. “Not if a friend is asking me to do it.”

“Hee-hee. I would’ve made you do it anyway!”

Takahashi let out a white breath into her hands and then rubbed them together. Her jacket was enchanted with cold-resistant magic, but it still wasn’t enough to completely protect her from the chill this close to the cryotolerance zone’s border.

“Ugh, so cold,” she grumbled.

“Shouldn’t you have brought something thicker to wear...?”

“Nah, you *don’t* wear extra clothes *because* it’s cold. That’s the trend these days. But whatever, let’s get down to brass tacks. The Yakuza Guild owns this warehouse. It’s the perfect spot for crime because it’s almost outside the cryotolerance zone. No one comes near here, not even the City Guard.”

“Yakuza Guild, huh? So scoundrels.”

“Yep. You scared?”

“Ha! Thugs don’t bother me. So what we need to steal is inside this warehouse, correct?”

“Yeah, I’m almost certain. There’s a therian and an ogre yakuza group in there—Lobo Brig and Fulmination Gold respectively. They’re doing business as we speak. Oh, by the way, you gotta be slick in this line of work—that’s basically my motto. Keep that in mind, Velly.”

“Understood.”

“And just to be super clear: We’re not stealing a physical object. It’s not something we can actually take away from these guys. What I mean is we’re here for infor—”

Veltol had already run off before she could finish.

He needed to speed things up if the deal was already in progress. Takahashi didn’t seem like she had combat training, so he concluded he should go ahead

by himself.

Having regained faith, his body reinforced with mana was able to move over twenty meters in one step, so he reached the ogres keeping watch outside in a flash.

“Wh-who the hell are you?!”

Veltol’s sudden appearance left them in shock. One ogre tried to take something out of his suit pocket, but a swift kick in the groin took him out of action.

Veltol kicked the other ogre in the stomach while he was still paralyzed in confusion.

“Argh!”

The well-over-three-hundred-pound ogre crashed against the steel door, breaking it. Both he and the door were sent flying into the warehouse.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Veltol said as he carefully entered.

There were ten total ogres and therians inside the now well-ventilated warehouse. There were pallets and containers all over, and the sky was visible from a big hole in the ceiling.

At the center were a therian and an ogre man exchanging a small, palm-sized cube. Veltol’s sudden arrival had everyone frozen in place.

“Takahashi, do you want me to steal that small box?” Veltol asked through the aether.

“Yeah, that cube is... Wait, what the heck?! I thought you didn’t have a Familia! How’d you connect to mine?! And I wasn’t even finished telling you the plan!”

“It’s nothing particularly surprising. I simply reproduced the Familia’s aether communications function with magic.”

“You did what?!”

“Familia communications operate via Whisper magic, a form of telepathy. It’s not difficult to replicate once you figure that out.”

“Gee, you make it sound sooo easy...”

“In any case, I’ll take care of everyone here and steal the objective.”

“Just don’t kill anybody!”

“I know. I’ll show them the power of a million followers’ faith.”

He cut the connection.

“Who the hell are you?!”

The yakuza men regained their composure and started harassing the intruder.

“I am the Demon Lord Veltol Velvet Velsvalt. I pity you, foolish mortals, for I’ve chosen you as the next subjects to test out my recovered faith. Hopefully you will serve as a good enough warm-up.”

“Ya got some real guts, tryin’ ta break in here! Say yer prayers!” a dog therian in a black suit howled.

He took a magi-gun out from his pocket.

Magi-guns were a type of combat magi-gadget that used simplified and specialized magic assistance from the Familia. They were very similar to the magic assistance tools used by the mages of yore: staves, wands, spell scrolls, and the like. Magi-guns worked by inserting a card-shaped scroll into the throttle, then pulling the trigger to activate the magic engraved on the scroll.

The therian yakuza pulled the trigger, and a small magic circle expanded for a moment around the muzzle like a flash.

Aether Arrow, huh?

Veltol immediately recognized it just by looking at the technic drawn in the circle.

Aether Arrow was a classic magic that had existed since ancient times. As the name implied, it shot an arrow made of aether, with stronger piercing power than traditional arrows, which made it a reliable attack.

“Vestum!” Veltol activated his strengthening magic in response.

It was the equivalent of a mix of modern buffs Might of the Dragon, Righteousness, and Gift of Strength. A normal body would break from the

overload of so many magics, but Veltol was able to achieve such ridiculous strengthening thanks to his immortal powers constantly regenerating his body.

Six blue arrows of light flew at high speeds, leaving a trail behind. Each of them had enough power to pierce a thick iron plate.

“Hah!”

And Veltol smashed every single one of them with his fists. The shattered aether arrows turned to phosphorescent light.

Besides the Vestum enchantment, he also had a magical effect called the Dragonscale Effect, which replicated the natural magical protection found in dragon scales—this barrier was what allowed him to break the arrows.

The magic from that ancient spell, possible now that he regained enormous mana through his faith, was on a whole different level from modern magic.

“What?!”

“You gotta be kidding me!”

The yakuza opened their eyes wide in shock at what he had done. The aether arrows easily surpassed the speed of sound, and he took down all six of them at the same time, so of course they were shocked. No human’s reaction speed could keep up—but he was no human. He was the Demon Lord.

“Is that all you’ve got? Very well... Now it’s my turn.”

Veltol disappeared.

He jumped all the way to one of the ogres in a flash and sank his fist into the enemy’s chest.

The ogre fainted with no time to even react.

He could’ve punched right through him, but Takahashi did tell him not to kill anyone. So he restrained himself to only incapacitate his foe.

“Y-you bastard!”

A nearby therian pointed his gun at him.

Veltol approached him before he could pull the trigger, broke both of his arms, and then dealt a blow to his head to render him unconscious.

The ensuing fights followed the same pattern. Veltol would move before the opponent could do anything, and a second later, they were down.

He was like a gust of black wind, defeating foes with every blow.

He gave them no time to defend themselves. It was a massacre.

“Pathetic. I had much more trouble with the tutorial enemies in *BS1*.”

“Shaddaaap!”

Veltol finally found himself in the crosshairs after defeating eight enemies with a single breath.

This one wasn’t a magi-gun. It was a real one.

It was an antique, used alongside daggers in yakuza guilds like a sort of tradition, but they were not only ceremonial—they still had use as real murder weapons that needed no mana.

“Rot in hell!”

The man pulled the trigger.

The 9 mm bullet shot away alongside the muzzle flash. It wouldn’t deal enough damage on Veltol’s strengthened body. However, killing its momentum completely wasn’t possible, so it could deal a serious injury if it hit a place with thin mana protection like the eyes.

Even then, he didn’t evade nor defend himself. He didn’t need to.

“Argh!”

The bullet made the ogre yakuza behind him do a somersault and fall down.

“H-huh? Why’d I shoot him...?” The yakuza confusedly stared at the smoking muzzle.

He had clearly aimed at the man behind Veltol, as if Veltol hadn’t been there in the first place. But he hadn’t moved an inch.

Veltol felt a peculiar fluctuation in aether from where Takahashi was. He concluded this must have been her doing.

Once the last man fainted, Veltol was the only person left in the warehouse.

“It’s over, Takahashi.”

“H-holy... I was watching through the drones and holy... I kneel, Demon Lord... You defeated the yakuza unarmed, you freakin’ monster... Damn, I’m so glad I didn’t end up hiring that dumbass...”

“No, no, I’m actually still quite far from peak condition.”

“Man, I kinda don’t wanna see you at your peak...”

“In any case, you dealt that last blow, correct?”

“Hee-hee, I’ll tell you about it later. We’ve got more important stuff to do right now.”

“Right, I’ll go retrieve the box.”

“Ah, hold up, I’ll meet you there.”

Veltol suddenly felt a chill up his spine.

“No! Stay back, Takahashi!”

Even he couldn’t explain how he was able to react to what had just fallen down in front of him. He could write it off as a change in the wind, an ambient sound, or a delicate disturbance in the aether, but it really was just a gut feeling.

Even so, if it hadn’t been for that gut feeling, he wouldn’t have jumped backward and would’ve been crushed without him even knowing.

It wasn’t rain, snow, hail, or even spears that had fallen.

A magic circle appeared at its feet as it landed silently. Veltol instantly recognized it was using Catwalk, magic for controlling descent.

Its arm stripped away the transparent cloth covering it. The cloth, enchanted with the Chameleon spell, changed color to blend in with the surrounding aether. This was a form of magical camouflage. And since airborne aether was colorless, using Chameleon turned the user invisible.

Beneath the cloth was a gray suit of armor that stood more than four meters tall.

“Magi-gear?!” Takahashi exclaimed.

These magiweapons were usually referred to as MG for short.

They were the fusion of the basic concept of powered suits and golems—ground warfare weapons that greatly improved physical capabilities through mana. These full-body military tanks were developed for city warfare with its narrow paths and diverse terrain. They excelled in multidimensional movement.

“No way... That’s a fourth-gen MG, an Ashed Dawn... What’s a thing like that doing here? Why do the yakuza have one in the first place?! They’re supposed to be for the City Guard’s special forces!”

“So this is an MG... I’ve read about them on the aethernet, but this is my first time seeing one for myself. Its upper half is massive, simultaneously rugged and stocky yet somehow sophisticated. The designer clearly has good taste... What a beauty...”

“Now’s not the time! Run! No way you can defeat that thing!”

Obviously, no human stood a chance. An MG could only be defeated by another MG. That was an ironclad rule.

Nonetheless, the Demon Lord sneered.

Veltol’s warrior senses were tingling before the new threat.

“Looks like you will satisfy me in testing my power.”

“...”

The MG didn’t answer, but that was fine. There was no need for words.

“On your guard!”

Veltol picked up the magi-gun one of the yakuza dropped, aimed at the MG, and pulled the trigger multiple times.

It was his first time using such a magi-gadget, but he figured it out the moment he touched it thanks to his Sage Eyes ability.

A magic circled appeared around the muzzle, and three magical bullets fired.

The Ashed Dawn didn’t move as the aether arrows hit him. The gray armor remained unscathed.

It maintained its calm posture. Why wouldn’t it? There was no way an MG

could lose. Regular handheld weapons couldn't pierce an Ashed Dawn's armor.

It then changed its stance, preparing to counterattack.

"It's similar to a metal golem but much more advanced...!"

Veltol proceeded to toss the gun aside and dash forward.

The gauntlet covering the Ashed Dawn's arm opened, and its manipulators took out a swordwand made of black mithril. The weapon had two modes—bullet mode and blade mode—that could create projectiles out of mana, allowing the user to fight either up close or from a distance.

It set the swordwand to bullet mode, then the assisting arm on its elbow inserted plenty of metal scroll cartridges on the magiweapon.

Veltol ran so fast he couldn't be seen by the naked eye, but the MG's nerve connection to its state-of-the-art aether sensors could easily locate him.

It took aim and immediately fired a blue mana bullet from the swordwand.

It was similar to the magi-gun's Aether Arrow, but the difference in power was like a gun used for self-defense and a military assault rifle. Only the strongest armor provided any protection.

The blue bullets easily drilled through the warehouse's walls.

Even Veltol wasn't quick enough to dodge. He stopped; right before a bullet could hit him...

"Dell Ray!"

...he'd already constructed and expanded a spell, then dictated the maginom while skipping the incantation.

Veltol shot rays of black light from his outstretched hands. They engulfed the blue bullets and headed straight for the Ashed Dawn. The compressed aether exploded on impact.

The Ashed Dawn ended up shrouded in the smoke.

I doubt that's enough to defeat it...

A blue bullet tore through the smoke and flew at him.

Veltol jumped back; the bullet pierced the exact location he was standing in just before.

“A mana barrier?”

The Ashed Dawn, still unscathed, reappeared from the dissipating smoke, standing behind a red barrier.

“I could’ve easily penetrated such paltry defenses during my peak... This must be the limit of my mana output with a measly million followers.”

“Measly?!” Takahashi objected.

Even though he had recovered a decent amount of faith, Veltol was still far away from his prime. But it wasn’t all for naught: The state-of-the-art magiweapon hadn’t canceled his magic.

“Not bad. I could have fun with this.”

Veltol waved one arm and summoned a pitch-black mana armor. The soul armament was forged from his own soul, and unlike those created with regular magic, armaments created with his soul were easily summoned through a simple ceremonial movement.

“Gradschere.”

A black mana sword appeared like a bundle of shadows. He’d created it with armament-casting magic.

Sword in hand, Veltol sprinted forward like a bullet.

The Ashed Dawn switched its swordwand to blade mode. The gun’s barrel extended, taking the form of a mana sword over two meters long. The scorching blade seared the air, creating a sound like a swarm of locusts.

The Ashed Dawn prepared to receive Veltol’s attack.

“It’s too dangerous, Velly!”

“You dare challenge me in close combat? Let’s see what you can do!”

The Ashed Dawn ran—nay, flew at him, pulverizing the floor underfoot.

The thrusters on its back, on top of its reinforcement magic and the assistance of its mithril fiber artificial muscles, culminated in it reaching 120 kilometers per

hour.

The mere sight of the huge metal mass moving at such a high speed was frightening enough, but Veltol didn't run away—not backward nor sideward. He kept on recklessly going forward.

The Ashed Dawn's pilot must have thought he was trying a suicide attack. The weight difference was much too obvious. The impact would send him flying like a piece of paper.

The Ashed Dawn held its blade high and swung it to the side.

Veltol also swung his—downward.

The black and red swords collided in a flash, and aether raced through the ground like lightning.

The swords repelled each other, and once again they clashed.

"I didn't think much of the armor, but I have to admit this is more interesting than I expected!"

The weapon was powerful, but the pilot's skills were nothing to write home about. Even then, Veltol couldn't overpower it. He clenched his teeth as he praised the armor that allowed an average person to surpass a veteran warrior.

"You've gotta be kidding... You're actually going head-to-head with an MG?!"

Takahashi, meanwhile, was flabbergasted. Of course she was. It was like someone going against a tank. She couldn't comprehend Veltol's power despite it being on display right in front of her.

"That's all?! Show me everything you've got!"

The Ashed Dawn took the bait, and its sensors started shining to indicate its output going on full power.

That was enough to hurl away Veltol's sword and arm. It was the obvious result of both parties' difference in power. Even with his magical strengthening, it was preposterous that he was standing his ground against an MG.

"Marvelous...!"

The Ashed Dawn swung its blade before Veltol could take a defensive stance.

Then...the Demon Lord's head went flying.

No blood gushed out, for the heated blade instantly cauterized the wound. Veltol's sword vanished into thin air.

The MG stopped moving. The pilot was relieved at having completed the job.

"Oh, it's not over yet."

The Demon Lord's decapitated head had spoken.

"What?! His—his head just...?!"

Veltol heard the MG pilot's confused voice.

"A word to the wise: Keep your sword even closer when you feel victorious."

Veltol's body picked his head up.

There was no need to regenerate from zero with his current faith and such a small wound. He put his head back on his shoulders and patched the wounds. His head was fully connected in a matter of seconds, all scars gone.

"Here's your reward for scoring a point."

An amount of mana far exceeding his previous output was released from his entire body. The mana rising from his armor was enveloped in a bluish-black light, and an aether crown formed on his head.



“Behold my Dark Sword. Carve this memory into your very soul.”

Veltol raised one arm and opened his hand.

“Rampage in the black sky! *Vernal!*”

Darkness oozed from Veltol’s hand as he made the proclamation.

It produced a single-edged sword.

“It pains me to think I won’t be making full use of it. Hopefully basking in the glory of its mere presence will suffice.”

The Demon Lord had summoned the Dark Sword, Vernal, the antithesis of the Hero’s Holy Sword, Ixasorde.

Also called the Black Sky’s Demonic Blossom, it was another of Veltol’s soul armaments, forged from his soul.

One look was enough to determine that the level and quality of mana it released was much higher than that of the sword Veltol had used moments ago.

The mana coming from it jolted the surrounding aether, creating alluring black waves that enveloped the blade.

Its shape instilled deep-seated fear in anyone who set eyes upon it.

“Oh? Scared, are you?”

“...! *You monster!*” came the pilot’s panicked voice.

In mere moments, Veltol got within reach of his opponent. He swung his blade, and the swordwand fell to the floor. He cut the manipulator holding it.

The manipulator’s cut surface was scorching red. Liquid aether flew everywhere, and coolant blew like smoke.

Veltol sliced the MG’s right knee joint like it was butter, and the Ashed Dawn lost its balance.

He moved behind it and made another slash. He cut the inner coolant tube connected to the back exhaust, which made the maintenance system forcefully shut down the machine. While they were crossing swords, Veltol had realized thanks to his Sage Eyes that the armor would stop once that part was cut.

Even an MG was no more than a magical gadget—it had its weaknesses.

“You put up a good fight. Your only misfortune was facing me in battle,” he told the pilot before swinging the Dark Sword.

The black blade once again dissolved into darkness.

“Time to make you talk,” he whispered while looking at the stalled MG.

“...I have nothing to say to you.”

Pop.

A hollow sound echoed within the Ashed Dawn.

It was the same sound Veltol had heard from the yakuza’s gun earlier. The defeated pilot had killed himself.

“.....”

The rush from defeating such a strong enemy vanished in an instant.

Veltol picked up the small box that had fallen just as Takahashi was entering the warehouse.

“Takahashi, is this what you were after?”

“Yeah, but more importantly—I lost the signal from the MG... D-did you really beat it?”

“I did.”

“What about the person inside?”

“Died by suicide.”

“What?!”

“I respect his resolve.”

“Urgh...” Takahashi looked at the motionless MG and gulped. “Wait, didn’t he chop your head off?”

“Indeed he did.”

“Don’t you *indeed* me! That was freakin’ nasty, man!”

“To think an individual in this era can be that strong... What a terrifying

concept.”

“Nope, no way, nuh-uh! *You’re* terrifying, dude! You freakin’ defeated an MG by yourself!”

“Only through what was basically an ambush. I’m not the type to care about how I win, but I don’t find such tactics to be worth bragging about.”

“Wow, so modest... But anyways, this thing here...” Takahashi looked at one side of the MG. It was engraved with a symbol of a torch. “Look...it’s IHMI’s logo. So the MG is from their security department? No way the yakuza got their hands on a thing like this. So...could it be IHMI knew about this deal taking place? This is getting sketchy as hell. Shit, I didn’t know the job would be *this* risky!”

“Setting that aside...”

“Don’t just set that aside! This is a scandal! The biggest corporation in Shinjuku might have ties to the yakuza!”

“It makes no difference to me if some corporation is involved with this yakuza group. Going back to the earlier fight, when that man shot his accomplice—that was your doing, was it not?”

“Well, aren’t you a real big shot... Yeah, that was some aether hacking. I hacked his Familia and overwrote the visual information his brain was receiving. Although I guess you didn’t really need my help. Actually, my original plan was to hack the gangsters’ Familias while they were checking out the info I needed. We could’ve stayed in the shadows the whole time.”

“Is that so? Sorry for being so hasty.”

“Hey, it all worked out in the end. I totally could’ve tripped their Black ICE—that’s a type of firewall. That woulda fried my Familia and nerves. Definitely not a good idea hacking Familias without a game plan.”

“So what is this?” Veltol handed her the box.

“It’s a mithril memory cube, a kind of external storage unit. My client wants it... Well, the info inside it, to be precise. Let’s take a look at it, then.”

“...You don’t think it’s better not knowing the contents?”

“Nah, it’s fine. Aren’t you curious? The client definitely knows I’m gonna take a peep. Probably. I needed to take a look for the original plan to work anyway, so whatever.”

Takahashi took out her holodisplay tablet from her jacket pocket, put it on a small, abandoned container, then placed the cube on top. Lines of light ran around the cube’s surface, creating a geometric pattern. The cube expanded from those lines, and the tablet loaded its data. A holographic paper was projected in the air. It was a text file contained in the cube, but nothing was written on it—it was blank.

“There’s nothing on here,” Veltol said.

“Gotta be encrypted. Gimme a sec.” Takahashi started nimbly typing away at the 3D keyboard displayed in midair. “There we go.”

As soon as she pressed `ENTER`, text appeared on the blank paper.

“Is encryption supposed to be breached that easily?” Veltol asked her.

“No way. The average hacker would take muuuuch longer. But I’m not your average hacker. Only a genius like me could do this. Now, let’s take a look...”

The two of them stared at the paper.

“Firewood list...?” Veltol murmured the title.

It was written in elvish, along with a list of names, many of which had a check mark beside them.

“Hmm? Looks like different people’s names. Dunno any of them, though,” said Takahashi. “Oh well.”

“These are...”

Unlike Takahashi, Veltol stared at the list with utmost intensity.

“What’s up?”

“These are...the names of immortals... My subjects...”

Myneus Tolkiens. Auge Chevelle. Severnus Sevirenta. Tyke Breaker. Orebell Orbelt. Taras Rod Stan. Raychet Schwenheik. Bawkins Rezendelt. Geryu. Porpule Dawn. Jeriella Sanock...

Veltol knew all of them.

Ornared and Palmlock, Machina's retainers, were also listed. Both had a check mark next to their names.

"Immortals...?"

"Yes...this might be only coincidence...but..."

He remembered what Machina had said:

The Immortal Hunt proper ended before City War II.

Immortals were still disappearing. And their names were on this list.

Veltol had a bad feeling.

"You don't think...the Immortal Hunt is still going on behind the scenes?" said Takahashi. "No, we shouldn't jump to conclusions... Velly, do you have any idea what they mean by 'firewood' here?"

"Not a clue."

"Hmmm... Doesn't seem like a simple list of Immortal Hunt survivors. Machina's name...isn't on here."

"Is that so...?" He felt relieved.

Veltol couldn't tell at that moment, but his old self wouldn't have cared this much. He used to be impartial to all immortals. Being thrown in this completely changed world, he too had changed without realizing.

"I'll ask my client what this thing is. Just gimme a sec... Crap, I can't reach him. He doesn't usually take unfamiliar calls, so I guess we'll just have to go straight to his place."

"Very well. I can no longer turn the other cheek. If something is happening to the immortals, it's my duty as king to take care of it."

Takahashi nodded, and they left for her client's home.



They headed to an upper-class neighborhood near a loop line station, a bit away from Kabukicho Street in Inner Shinjuku, then arrived at one particular high-rise apartment building.

Veltol had removed his armament and was once again wearing his tracksuit and coat.

“This is one big apartment,” he said.

“It’s pricey even for the neighborhood. My client owns the entire thirteenth floor.”

“Good on him for making so much money.”

“You’d never know it from lookin’ at him, though. He’s pretty famous; anyone even remotely involved in this line of work in Shinjuku knows him. The rest just act like they don’t know him.”

“Is it really a good thing for an informant to be well-known? I’m no expert, so forgive me if I’m off the mark.”

“I mean...”

They reached the entrance as they talked. There was a security guard outpost and an intercom, with a reinforced double-glazed glass door at the back separating the inside from the outside. These luxury apartments were well protected.

“Takahashi, I don’t think these doors open for anyone who’s not a tenant.”

“Aw, it’s fine. C’mere.”

Takahashi didn’t call anyone from the intercom and walked straight to the door. It opened automatically.

“Was that also hacking?” Veltol asked.

“Heh, this level of security? Piece of cake.”

“Wow. So much for keys, then.”

“I know, right? Heh-heh-heh. Please, heap on the praise. Nothing I can do about physical security systems, though.”

They entered the elevator at the end of the hallway.

Veltol took up position in front of the elevator’s panel.

“Takahashi.”

“Yeah?”

“Let me push the buttons.”

“Sure, but why?”

“I just...like pushing buttons...”

“Can’t say I’ve ever seen a demon lord who’s into pushing buttons...”

Veltol pressed the button.

“Hmm?” He pressed it again and again, but nothing happened. “Is it broken?”

“Ah, sorry. You can’t go directly to the thirteenth floor.” Takahashi had to push the buttons after all. “First you go to the second floor, then the seventeenth, then back to the fourth, then the top floor, and finally, you push the thirteenth’s button.”

“Why the annoying sequence?”

“Who knows what goes through that weirdo’s head? He probably figures it works as some sort of security measure.”

After the annoying trip all over the building, they finally reached the thirteenth floor.

Veltol tried to exit the elevator as soon as its doors opened, but Takahashi stopped him.

“Hold up.”

“Why?”

“My client—his name’s Eju. He’s got traps set all over the place. You’ll end up like swiss cheese if you’re not careful.”

“I see... Hmm? Wait, that’s not true. There are no traps.”

Veltol exited the elevator without a care in the world. It looked so natural that even Takahashi took a moment to react.

“Huh? Whoa, heeey! Wait! I told you to wait!”

“In fact, all magical and physical traps have already been disarmed.”

“What? Lemme do a quick scan... Wow, you’re right. There’s zero mana

reaction from this floor. How'd you know?"

"Bwa-ha-ha! Who do you take me for? Part of my duties as Demon Lord was constructing and managing dungeons. I can locate traps blindfolded."

"Aha."

They reached one of the apartments without any traps activating. Takahashi buzzed the intercom, but no one answered.

"Weird. I thought for sure he'd come out."

"Wait, Takahashi. The door isn't locked."

"Huh?"

Veltol turned the knob, and the door opened.

"...Traps disarmed, the door's unlocked... Something happened here," said Takahashi.

"Indeed. Let's proceed with caution."

They carefully entered the apartment.

Takahashi knew the layout, so she led the way while Veltol covered her rear.

"Quite a spacious apartment," he noted.

"Yeah, that's why it's so freakin' expensive."

"I'd like to move to a place like this with Machina once we save up enough money..."

They opened the door to the living room. It was big and mostly empty—no carpet, and only a commercial refrigerator to speak of in the kitchen.

"Ugh... What's that smell? It reeks... Just gonna turn off my olfactory senses..."

"...This smell..."

A dreadful stench that Veltol knew very well permeated the entire room.

They stayed alert and stopped in front of the door at the end of the living room. The smell got more and more intense as they approached.

"Hey, Eju, you home?" Takahashi knocked at the door, but no one answered.

Left with no options, she opened it and went inside.

Unlike the rest of the barren apartment, this room was basically a pigsty. Bottles left unfinished, empty snack bags all over the floor... The room itself was big, but it felt cramped due to the copious amounts of trash.

Most of that claustrophobic feeling came from the giant wall-to-wall display cases filled with an excessive number of anime girl figures—all very neatly organized, but just way too many. There were well over a couple hundred of them. More than impressive, it was frightening.

At the other side of the room was a desk and a high-end gaming chair. A man was seated motionless on it.

“Ejyu! Found ya. You sleeping?”

Takahashi crossed the sea of garbage and put a hand on the chair’s backrest. The body leaning on it immediately tipped over and fell to the floor.

“Eek...!”

The moment she saw him, Takahashi also collapsed.

A swarm of flies rose from the orc.

Ejyu was already dead.

“H-he’s dead...!”

Takahashi frantically crawled over to Veltol and then got to her feet.

“Hmm?” Veltol knew Ejyu’s face. He recognized the well-dressed orc. “This man...”

“You know him?”

“Yes, although I’ve met him only once.” It was the vagabond who gave Veltol a résumé during his job hunt. “Although he was dressed much more shabbily back then. To think that man was Ejyu...”

“Yeah...he dresses like a hobo when snooping for intel.”

Takahashi was still in shock but managed to stay calm enough to answer. Coming across dead bodies wasn’t particularly uncommon in Shinjuku—more so when working as an aether hacker.

Veltol crouched down and examined Eju's corpse. "It seems he's been dead for four days."

"Bleh..."

Veltol gazed unflinchingly at the orc's maggot-infested wounds and added, "He has two injuries: one to the chest, one to the neck. I assume the magic traps didn't activate because their user was already dead. Should've made them auto-triggered." Veltol took a look around. "They stabbed through the chair into his heart, then slashed his carotid artery, Familia and all. Based on the wounds and the blood splatter, the weapon was around three toms long."

Three toms was roughly one meter.

"How can you tell all that so easily?" Takahashi was perplexed at Veltol's methodical analysis.

"Have you forgotten who you're speaking to? I'm the immortal Demon Lord."

"Mm-hmm... Weird how convincing that sounds... Guess that's all the explanation I need, then."

"Regardless, for your client to turn up dead right around now..."

"Eju had a lot of enemies... People from all walks of life despised him."

"No, I don't think this was done out of spite."

"How so?"

"The job's too clean. There's no emotion in these cuts."

"Emotion, huh...? You can tell that much?"

"That's right. Blades are the clearest way to express emotion. Had this been done with deep resentment, the wounds, too, would show it. This is a very clinical murder."

"So you mean...it was a hired hit?"

"And a highly trained one at that."

"True, no regular assassin would've been able to get through all his traps without Eju noticing... But it still might be someone with a grudge who'd just hired an assassin, y'know?"

“Not at all. If that were the case, why destroy the Familia?”

“Couldn’t that be coincidence?”

“He wouldn’t have had a neck wound in the first place. Simply destroying the heart is enough to kill a mortal.”

“...So they wanted to destroy his Familia’s data?”

“That’s it,” Veltol replied with a nod. “Whoever killed him or had him killed wanted to get rid of some data.”

“You think that has to do with the job he commissioned me for?”

“It’s very likely. When did he submit the request?”

“Lemme check the logs... One week ago.”

“So that means he died soon after. Now that both the client and his Familia are gone, we only have this list to go by...”

“...No, we might have something else,” Takahashi said before starting to rummage through the room. “I don’t think Eju had the most critical data stored on his Familia. Seems the perp didn’t look through his stuff, either. Eju was as good an aether hacker as he was an informant; I doubt he’d leave any intel that valuable out in the open.”

She overturned the display cases and ripped up the carpet.

“Familias have to be connected to the aethernet basically all the time, so they’re always at risk of getting hacked. You could even say that it’s the worst place to store important data. The obvious solution is to keep that stuff in external storage.”

She checked beneath the desk and opened the drawers.

“Gotcha.”

Takahashi grabbed the computer hidden in the back of one of the drawers.

“What is that?” Veltol asked.

“An old laptop, one that’s been heavily modded,” she answered as she sat on the floor and turned the computer on. “The battery’s...not dead, nice. Wait—huh? It’s not password locked...?”

Takahashi was puzzled, but she got straight to typing, then browsed and sorted through the most recent files. She opened a folder that had been modified one week earlier, and thousands of files were projected in midair.

“The hell? They’re all corrupted? What am I supposed to do now...?”

The data was basically useless.

“...No, wait, they’re not just broken.” Veltol glanced over her shoulder and shook his head.

“Huh? Whaddaya mean?”

“Try looking at the files from above. It looks just like a technic’s spell structure. There has to be some meaning hidden in here.”

“Ah! Now I see it. A program array, huh... How’d you figure that out so quickly?”

“There were plenty of riddles back in ancient times that involved a pile of what looked like meaningless trash that was in fact something meaningful when you saw the full picture.”

“In that case...”

Takahashi quickly brought up the command window, then started typing at lightning speed. As soon as she pressed `ENTER`, the thousands of corrupted files disappeared, leaving only a video file behind. She’d restored it by combining the corrupted data.

“Bingo! Velly, you were right! Oh, hey, don’cha think that *bingo!* line was pretty hacker-ish? Like, hell yeah, dude, I’m super legit.”

“I have no idea what counts as hacker-ish...”

Veltol then muttered the video file’s name:

“The Immortal Furnace Project...”

He remembered hearing that before. It was in the note Machina’s retainers had left when they disappeared.

“Let’s open it,” said Takahashi.

“Yeah.”

She tapped the file, and the video program opened, taking up the entire display.

There was the well-dressed orc—when he was still alive.

“Ejyu...”

“Hey.” The on-screen Ejyu raised a hand. “If you’re watching this video, then that means I’ve been murdered. Man, I always wanted to say that.”

“You dork...” Takahashi chided her old friend with a tinge of sadness in her voice.

“I guess whoever’s watching this video’s gotta be Bunny Bones, Bill, Hio, Shar, or maybe even whoever killed me. Not that there’s any point in my murderer watching this video to begin with.”

Ejyu’s gentle gaze turned serious.

“Let’s cut to the chase... There’s some real gruesome evil behind this city’s growth and prosperity.”

The orc continued:

“The basis of Shinjuku’s aether reactor, the infrastructure of one of the biggest cities in the world—this reactor that powers all of our lives—is drenched in disgusting lies. Behind this city’s development lie many sacrifices that were hidden from the public. The current city of Shinjuku is built atop the lives of the innocent.”

“This...strangely doesn’t sound like just some conspiracy theory...,” said Takahashi.

“They use Alnaeth’s immortals as fuel, burning their souls like firewood to turn them into aether... They feed them to the aether reactor through the Immortal Furnace, and that’s where the city’s mana and electricity comes from. All of us—we’ve all been feeding off other peoples’ deaths. I get that there’s always gonna be sacrifices in the name of city development and technological advancement, but I just can’t overlook a thing like this.”

“The Immortal Furnace...,” Veltol whispered in a low, icy tone.

“The aether reactor’s supposed to draw from the aether lines that run from

the planet's core all the way to the surface. The resulting mana and electricity's then used to supply the city."

Veltol already knew the basic gist of the aether reactor, since he'd looked it up on the aethernet.

"Normally, small cities build their reactors on top of spots where three or more aether lines overlap. Obviously, it's much cheaper to do that than build three different reactors on top of three independent lines; plus, the overlap makes pumping more efficient."

"Whoa, I never really noticed until now, but one good thing about Ejyu was that he'd always explain this sort of thing when needed," said Takahashi.

"In order to generate enough electricity for a city as big as Shinjuku with just one aether reactor, you'd need to build it on top of an overlap of ten aether lines. According to public records, there are thirteen lines below Shinjuku." However... "Those records are falsified. Not that I think anyone out there would trust the public information on this city."

"Yep," Takahashi agreed. "The truth isn't worth a damn when you have a huge corporation holding power."

"The geological survey held before the First City War concluded that Shinjuku's aether lines were lacking, and in fact, below the area where the reactor is now, there's only two of them overlapping. That was enough to support the city's size back then, but with its current population—not to mention the factories' output—getting enough energy from just two lines is impossible. And then once the Immortal Hunt was over, the data was mysteriously modified to say there's thirteen lines under Shinjuku. Aether lines don't multiply, which means the documents were very clearly falsified."

Veltol and Takahashi silently listened to Ejyu's explanation.

"So the question now is: Where are they getting enough energy to power Shinjuku if there's just two lines? We get electricity everywhere inside the cryotolerance zone, so they're definitely compensating for it somehow. But that contradicts the prewar survey."

The answer was...

“The Immortal Furnace?”

Ejyu continued, as if replying to Veltol:

“The current reactor was made by repairing and remodeling the previous world’s Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, but the actual construction work started by the end of City War I, and it only started functioning right before City War II.”

Ejyu took a deep breath.

“Truth is, the Immortal Furnace Project was the cornerstone of the reactor’s construction. They decided to supplement the insufficient aether with the Immortal Furnace and use that energy to power the city. There’s evidence that they hired Shinjuku citizens to construct the reactor’s shallower areas and foreigners, low-income earners, and the unemployed for the deeper sections closer to the aether lines. And in those depths is where the Immortal Furnace was built. There’s also no record of the workers who built it. Most of that data was destroyed.”

“Th-then those people they used to build the Immortal Furnace...,” Takahashi stammered.

“Yes—it’s highly likely they were disposed of,” said Veltol. “Schemes this enormous only work if as few people know about it as possible. That’s how this remained secret until now.”

“Like I said at the beginning, they use immortals as fuel and their souls as firewood to generate aether in one big ritual magic facility. What’s alarming is the efficiency. Even a million mortal souls isn’t enough to power a city, but immortals are different. A single soul from these borderline divine beings generates aether en masse. The Shinjuku metropolis can subsist on just one immortal soul—and the more powerful the soul, the longer that fuel lasts.”

“...” Veltol’s expression had lost all emotion except for the quiet anger burning in his eyes.

“They literally call the immortals fed into the Furnace firewood. From what I could gather, the first immortal killed in this project was one of the Six Dark Peers of ancient times, the Duke of the Karmic Sword, Zenol. An important

character in Alnaeth's history who served the Demon Lord Veltol."

"Zenol..."

Veltol reminisced about his vassal. Zenol was as loyal as Machina—one of his proud warriors. Veltol trusted him deeply. Had Zenol been similarly gifted in magic like Machina or Ralsheen of the Blue Storm, Veltol would have also taught him how to activate Methenoel.

"The Immortal Hunt that took place after City War I was just an excuse to gather firewood for the Immortal Furnace. IHMI located immortals in various cities and rounded 'em up in exchange for weapons and technology."

"...This totally sounds like a bunch of made-up crap or some nutjob's aethernet ramblings, but when it's coming from someone as reliable as Ejyu..." Takahashi commented as she looked at the data being shown in the video.

"You might be asking why I was investigating this in the first place, and the answer's simple: revenge. I was looking for leads on an immortal friend of mine who mysteriously disappeared, and that's when I came across IHMI's old database and salvaged some remains of the Immortal Furnace Project's records."

"Mysteriously disappeared..." Veltol repeated. "Just like Machina's companions..."

"Then, just three months ago, an IHMI assassin found me as I was gathering intel. I managed to escape somehow, but they beefed up their security, and I couldn't keep on snooping. That's why I hired my hacker bud to do some of the work, since I'd learned that IHMI was selling a list of immortals to the yakuza. The firewood's running out, and soon the Immortal Furnace might stop working. IHMI had to covertly resume the long-finished Immortal Hunt."

"So my job was getting that list," said Takahashi.

"Indeed."

"Once the souls in the Immortal Furnace have burned up, the aether supply's gonna run dry. That's basically a death sentence for Shinjuku. So although I want to expose IHMI's heinous crimes, I can't simply repudiate the Furnace altogether. I'm benefiting from it, too, as are all the people living in this city.

Hate to say it, but I'm neither arrogant nor strong enough to get my revenge if it means getting rid of everything that supports my lifestyle and everyone else's."

Ejyu sounded deeply remorseful. Veltol could tell that the orc had reached this decision after much, much thought.

"But I still think this whole thing's wrong. Nothing can justify sacrificing innocent lives. I only hope my fellow hackers can get to this video from the hints I left. This huge scandal could tear IHMI down. I've got all this data collected and stored in my PC. You can make it public or keep it hidden; it's up to you. Sorry for leaving this much responsibility on you."

Lastly, he said in a jokey tone:

"But hey, I doubt anyone can solve this once-in-a-lifetime predicament. Unless they're literally that legendary Demon Lord who ruled the immortals, or some shit like that."

Neither Takahashi nor Veltol spoke for a while after the video ended. They couldn't.

"I've always identified with immortals more than most. I know the prejudice against them is wrong, that they're not all bad people. Sacrificing them to power the city is just..." Takahashi's voice was hoarse. "...It's just not okay, man. We've gotta do something..."

"What do you suggest? Shall we put this on the aethernet?"

"But—"

"Then IHMI would most likely come after *you*, like they did with Ejyu. They might erase the info before anyone sees it. And even if you did make it public and shut down the Immortal Furnace, there's no guarantee that the citizens of Shinjuku would be any safer."

"...B-but..."

Takahashi looked down, and her shoulders trembled. Veltol then put a hand on them to soothe her.

"This is a problem among us immortals. It's my responsibility as Demon Lord to do something about it. You don't have to worry. Leave all decisions to me."

“Okay...”

“What about the body, then?”

“I’d feel bad just leaving him here, but there’s nothing we can do. It’s probably best to report it to the City Guard.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Now, I have to tell Machina about this.”

“Yeah... Although I bet she’ll take it pretty hard, too...”

Veltol called Machina through the aether.

“Machina, can you hear me?”

But there was no answer.

An awful sensation welled up in his chest, as though there were a heavy piece of lead buried within.

He had no proof that anything was wrong. There was nothing to go by. But this ominous feeling was proof enough.

“Machina...?”

His words were empty. No matter how many times he called her name, she didn’t respond.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Demon Lord Does Battle

Let us rewind time to just as Veltol was going out for his package.

Machina was preparing dinner at home. Her cutting board had all the ingredients she'd bought earlier, and her virtual retinal display had a cooking app open to a recipe that used each ingredient.

"I'll make some curry tonight."

The most important ingredient of all is love—so said the app whenever you booted it up.

And love had to be transmitted verbally. She fired herself up by saying the name of tonight's dish out loud.

Machina opened the music app, and her Familia started playing a song directly into her brain. She hummed merrily to the tune.

"I have to say, my diet has truly come a long way from what it once was."

Machina thought back on the past. When the wars and the Immortal Hunt and poverty were at their peak, it wasn't rare for her to go an entire month without eating. Even after the wars, she had no stable income and no place to call home—she always had to cut down on food expenses. There was a period of time when she had to line up early in the morning for some insipid soy rations, a leftover surplus from wartime.

"Each city had their own specialties. Abashiri's was the best... Though I think I ate a lot of Sendai rations, too."

Machina reminisced about the soy rations and their sickening color that came from the food-grade cryoprotectant mixed in. Abashiri's rations had just a semblance of flavoring, which made her reexamine exactly what counted as food. Now, that was only a pleasant memory.

Their diet had gotten much more luxurious thanks to Veltol's earnings as a streamer.

And it wasn't just a matter of luxuries—his mere presence was enough to bring color back to her life. Although she couldn't tell whether this was due to the Demon Lord's inherent charisma or a change in her own heart.

"All right, let's do this!"

Just as Machina started putting on an apron, the cheap doorbell rang.

"Who could that be?"

Not Veltol. The door was locked with magic, and he had no reason to ring the bell. It couldn't be Takahashi, either, since she always let Machina know beforehand when she was coming over.

Maybe a delivery? Some sort of proselytizer? A salesperson? Questions filled Machina's head as she opened the door.

And that's where she found the one person she was least expecting.

"Hello there, Machina. It's been a long time."

It was the CEO of IHMI, former member of the Six Dark Peers, traitor to immortalkind, and regicidal maniac: Marcus.

"—!"

She reflexively moved as soon as she saw him. There was no need to talk to the traitor and rebel. All surprise instantly turned to rage. The characteristic trait of the ignia people showed on her body. Her initialized mana ran through her hair and eyes, lighting them up like a bonfire of burning, vivid crimson, and the surrounding aether glowed like blazing sparks.

"Phoenix Blaze!"

That proclamation was her greeting.

She no longer thought of him as a fellow; she didn't hesitate.

The Familia's quantum processor reverse engineered the construction and expansion from the maginom's proclamation.

Fire lit up at the tips of her extended hand's fingers, immediately forming a

line of flames that burned everything in front of her, blowing the housing complex's guardrails away.

The words *security deposit* flashed through her mind, but she quickly shook them off.

With a wave of her hand, Machina was engulfed head to toe in flames that became the black armor made from her mana. It was armament forged from her soul, summoned in the same way as Veltol's.

The aether reacted to the mana emitted by the armor, shining like the ifrista, a black stone with flames at its core, and a tiara of flames appeared on her head.

Lovely yet stern—such was the Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze's battle armor.

Machina took a step out the entrance into the hallway.

Marcus was standing on the empty parking lot outside the tofu apartments. He didn't seem the least bit injured. Although, even if he had received the attack directly, mere flames weren't enough to kill an immortal.

Machina jumped down to the parking lot.

The phoenix and the vampire stood facing each other—true crimson versus deep crimson.

"Marcus...!"

Machina glared at him, her scarlet eyes burning with wrath. Meanwhile, Marcus's thin, collected smile stayed glued to his face.

"Not even a hello? My, how violent you've become. You used to be such a well-mannered young lady, remember?"

"Silence. You came to destroy me, yes? You betrayed the immortals; you betrayed our king! Even the most painful death won't be punishment enough."

Machina lowered her body like a beast aiming for its prey, then leaped. The ground exploded from the sheer force, while she kept on accelerating thanks to her mana-strengthened muscles.



Her Familia kept showing her message after message of it blocking attacks through the aethernet. Aetherhack warfare was already underway, and she wasn't skilled in such combat. She could only defend herself, unable to put any resources into countering.

Machina cut connection to the aethernet, switching to standalone mode. She wasn't backed up to the aethernet in the first place, so she didn't have any need to stay connected.

Machina unleashed a swift attack. Marcus could take advantage of even the slightest bloodshed, so she couldn't let this turn into a battle of attrition. She had to defeat him before he had a chance to react.

"Dragon Slasher!" Machina activated her magic while accelerating.

A magic circle expanded at Marcus's feet, followed by pillars of fire that billowed sky-high. Marcus retreated before he could be engulfed by the flames.

"Bloodsword."

Bloodied aether took the shape of thirteen swords.

"Moonlit Blade of Fire!"

Another thirteen swords emerged, this time from flaming aether.

The blades appeared simultaneously and clashed. A burst of fire erupted throughout the parking lot.

"Well done, Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze! It seems we are equally matched in magical warfare!"

Machina paid no mind to his frivolous chitchat. She slipped through the flames and reached her arm out to touch him.

"Burst, Safflower!"

An explosion erupted from Machina's palm. It was supposed to blow up his entire upper body, Familia and all, yet it barely managed to incinerate his arm.

"That was close. Bloodrain."

Marcus leaped backward with his remaining arm lifted up high, and he activated his magic.

It rained blood across a wide area, although the attack itself was basically harmless.

No...!

However, Machina knew this was preparation for a larger attack.

“Flame Shield Blossom!”

“Blood Bomb.”

They activated their respective magics almost simultaneously.

A fire barrier surrounded Machina, while Marcus made the blood rain around them explode.

“Ngh...! My house...!”

The flames engulfed the vicinity, destroying not only Machina’s house but the entire complex. All sorts of questions flashed through her mind—the safety of her neighbors, that she’d have to move earlier than planned, what had happened to her furniture, how she would even begin to explain this to the landlord and Veltol—but she shook them all off.

She couldn’t see through the smoke. The high density of mana had the aether in chaos, and she couldn’t scan the surroundings with her VRD.

While she was thinking what to do next...

“Dragon Blade: Chidori.”

...she heard that from above.

She looked up and found a woman in a suit—Kinohara—jumping down from a rooftop. She held her sheathed katana tight, aiming right at Machina’s neck. However...

“Flying Haze!”

...just as the blade was leaving its sheath, Machina disappeared.

“...?!”

Kinohara opened her eyes wide in shock. Machina had instantaneously moved above her head.

"I didn't think for a second that the Duke of the Bloody Arts had come alone. I knew he'd have someone ready to ambush me, and it seems I was right."

She managed to counter the surprise attack.

"Turn to ash!"

Machina reached out to roast Kinohara with her magic, but before it activated...

"Code Breaker."

...Marcus's brief proclamation shut down her Familia.

"What?!"

Everything on her VRD had been disabled; nothing was responding.

Kinohara saw an opening from Machina's confusion and stabbed her heart.

"Argh...!"

Machina fell backward, pinned to the ground.

"Urgh!"

She grabbed the blade to try and get it off, but that did nothing but cut her hands.

Her Familia was still shut down.

"Director, please stop playing around...," Kinohara grumbled as Marcus leisurely approached from within the smoke. "Had you allowed me to attack from the very beginning, then we would have wrapped this up much more quickly and tidily... I almost died back there."

"Ha-ha-ha! Oh, so sorry. I couldn't help myself from toying with her."

"Mar...cus..."

His face broke into a nasty smirk as he heard Machina's voice.

"Aaah... Aaaaaah!! Machinaaa, I never found you alluring, yet...seeing you down prostrated so pathetically on the ground is so, sooo...delightful..."

Marcus put a hand to his cheek as he let out a sigh of disgusting ecstasy.

“What...did you just...do?”

“Why, I simply shut down your Familia,” he answered as though it was obvious.

“You shut it down? But my Familia was on standalone mode... How could you even hack it when it was offline...?”

“My Familia’s not quite like others. It’s a prototype currently in development at our company. We call it the Familia Advance. I used it to bypass your backdoor.”

“Backdoor...?”

“The Familia’s base technic has a built-in backdoor. As director of IHMI, I can forcibly shut down any device made by my company. No one using a modern Familia can defeat me, nor can anyone without a Familia. You see what I’m getting at? I am the strongest person in the whole modern world.”

“That’s... Why would you...?”

“Because I will become the true Demon Lord.”

“What—?”

“Taking over the world through military force is so old-fashioned. Now you can conquer it by simply controlling information and technology...but that would be too boring. I need to become the absolute ruler—I *must* become the Demon Lord. Not Veltol. Me.”

Marcus was looking at Machina like she was an insect. It was a cold, derisive stare.

He approached her.

“Now then, Duchess of the Dazzling Blaze. I’ll have you become nourishment for this city.”

Machina lost consciousness after that.



Veltol had a bad feeling about the situation. He and Takahashi ran off.

Machina’s house wasn’t too far away from Ejyu’s apartment.

Veltol could see the smoke blowing from the tofu houses' direction, but he tried not to think about it. He might stop running if he did.

What is this feeling?

The Demon Lord didn't realize he was feeling more and more anxious the closer he got.

Machina's home was destroyed. And not only hers. All surrounding houses and buildings were devastated.

There was a crowd of onlookers around the City Guard caution tape prohibiting entry. Veltol pushed his way through.

"Machina."

She still wasn't answering.

"Machina!"

His heart was beating faster the closer he got.

"Machina..."

Finally, Veltol realized his feelings. He realized as soon as he stopped.

Machina had become such an enormous part of his life. He already knew she was an irreplaceable and important vassal, but this was no matter between king and retainer. In just three months, his feelings toward her had evolved into something more.

This might have been the first time in his life he had felt this way about someone. And it was what made him stop then.

"Velly, you okay?"

"Haaahhh..." He heaved a sigh. "No, it's nothing. I'm fine."

Veltol rid his mind of any unnecessary thoughts. What he needed in this moment wasn't anxiety or grief—he had to be calm in order to decide what to do next.

He approached one of the onlookers, a dwarf.

"Excuse me, could you tell me what happened here?" he asked.

“Hmm? No idea, man. I just heard an explosion, and the next thing I knew, this is what the place looked like.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Then Takahashi spoke up. “Velly, it’s all over the news: explosion in Shinjuku residential district. Seems they don’t know if it was an accident... There’s a lot of conflicting reports.”

“If only we could locate Machina...”

Machina wasn’t answering any Familia calls. They had no idea if she’d cut the aethernet connection or if she wasn’t able to answer for other reasons.

“Don’t worry,” said Takahashi. “I got this.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ve got eyes all over the city,” Takahashi answered as she pointed at the sky.

Veltol understood what she meant as soon as he saw what was flying overhead.

“The drones?!”

She nodded.

There were countless delivery drones in Shinjuku, and they all had security cameras. Locating Machina wouldn’t be hard if Takahashi could get their video data.

“But how are you going to access them?”

“Hee-hee-hee... Velly, don’t tell me you’ve learned nothing after all our time together.”

“...Of course—hacking!”

“Yep. There aren’t many security drones in Outer Shinjuku, but there’s plenty of delivery ones. And they, too, have cameras. We’ll use those.”

They left the area and headed to an empty alleyway. It was narrow and covered, so security drones couldn’t spot them.

Takahashi took a tablet with a bunny skull sticker out from her jacket’s inner

pocket, put it on an old wooden crate, and booted up its holoprojector. She then took a U-shaped dongle and plugged it into her Familia's socket. Finally, she connected the other end of the dongle to the tablet.

"All right, time to get serious!"

She put on her visual enhancement device—her trusty pair of sunglasses.

A 3D keyboard was projected in the air, and a telepathic keyboard also appeared in her Familia.

She then proceeded to hijack a delivery drone via the aethernet.

"Boot up Laughing Man." She initialized the visual hacking program on her Familia through voice recognition.

Takahashi began operating, updating, and overwriting the technic fluctuation algorithm in the drone's logic barrier in real time. Windows of all sizes hurriedly opened and closed one after the other. Once she broke through the barrier, Takahashi infiltrated the system and installed a virus, which gave the infected drone access to its company's server before finally displaying video data on the holoprojector.

As the virus went to work, Takahashi simultaneously hijacked other companies' drones and displayed more and more video feeds. Her Familia's artificial spirit automatically closed any feeds that showed footage outside the immediate proximity of Machina's house.

"There it is!"

Takahashi found the moment of the explosion from the pile of visual data.

"So the house was the epicenter, as I thought...," said Veltol.

"Yeah... Let's check out the before and after."

She calculated the exact time of the explosion and further refined the data. Then a man appeared on-screen.

"Marcus?!" Veltol shouted.

The video showed Marcus and Kinohara going up the stairs to Machina's house.

“The immortal behind the Immortal Hunt... I’d guessed he was involved in the Immortal Furnace’s construction, and it looks like I was right,” said Takahashi. “We’ve got our villain. But to think the CEO himself would come for Machina... Talk about thorough.”

“He must have concluded he needed to come here himself to fight one of the Six Dark Peers. The woman with him must be that secretary. Marcus, that son of a bitch... How did he even find Machina...? She wasn’t on the list.”

“Hang on, lemme connect the feeds.”

Takahashi edited the videos to form a timeline of events from different angles. They saw the moment Machina’s door exploded and the battle that took place afterward, although not in detail—the drones were likely destroyed in the aftermath. They did, however, see Machina being captured.

“Looks like they drove her to a restricted area inside the aether reactor,” said Takahashi. “They’re planning on feeding her to the Furnace.”

“Got it. I’ll go—”

“Wait. I get that you want to head there right now, but it’s too reckless for you to go alone.”

“...”

“The reactor’s in the most crucial section of Shinjuku, so it’s obviously heavily guarded by MGs. You can’t even get a drone in there. And I’ll bet security’s even tighter right now.”

Veltol understood what she was trying to say, but his desire to go help Machina was stronger.

“I can get you there, but I can’t help in battle. And there’s no one else I know who could measure up to you... Plus, you just got to this world a little while ago...”

“True, I don’t have many acquaintances in this modern age...even counting those who wouldn’t be of much help in battle...”

“Wh-what should we do? Machina’s gonna...” Takahashi anxiously scratched her head.

They had no way to get in contact with the other immortals, and the only ones Veltol knew in this age were Marcus and Machina, both already involved. It was anyone's guess whether any others were safe.

"None of my old acquaintances can..."

Then, he realized.

"No—there is one person."

His face came to mind. He knew just one of them. He had no idea if this person would be willing to help; in fact, it was more likely they wouldn't. But he still had hope.



Veltol finally reached him with bated breath.

Takahashi stayed put, looking for a way inside the reactor.

He hadn't even called him, but he knew he would be there. In a back alley where vagabonds slept, away from the eyes of society.

Veltol called the man's name:

"Gram..."

The Hero Gram. The Demon Lord Veltol's fated enemy and the only person he could rely on for battle in the current world.

Gram was sitting on the filthy ground, wearing a grubby hood and holding his rusty sword.

"Why are you here? I won't answer any more of your questions," he said coldly.

Veltol put his knees on the ground and lowered his head.

"Gram, I'm swallowing my pride to ask you this..." He pleaded with his head bowed all the way to the ground. "Could you please...help me?"

Veltol implored as earnestly as he could. Like a sinner repenting.

He told him all of it: about Marcus, the Immortal Furnace, Machina's kidnapping, that he had no way to save her. He hid nothing.

“I beg you, Gram. I don’t have the power to save her alone. You’re the only one I can turn to. Please, help me...”

He showed the utmost sincerity he could muster.

“...Right.” Gram glared at him from beneath the hood. His eyes were full of contempt. “So *that’s* why you’re asking me for help, Veltol.”

Gram slowly stood up and looked down on the Demon Lord.

“ ... ”

“Darklings killed my family, my friends, and countless other innocent people, but you, their king, want me to help save an immortal.”

“ ... ”

“You spread war wherever you went, trampled over so many lives—so many nations. And now that the shoe’s on the other foot, you’re so quick to bow your head and beg for help? You’re pathetic.”

“ ... ”

Veltol didn’t answer. He just kept his head low.

“Your vanity knows no bounds.” Gram sounded disgusted. “Look, I certainly can’t tolerate a society built upon the corpses of the innocent, even if those innocents are immortals. But the aether reactor is literally this city’s core. Even if what you said about the Immortal Furnace is true, you shouldn’t go barging into a fight just to serve your personal agenda. This isn’t a problem that needs solving because of your own ego. Shinjuku might perish if the Furnace stops.”

There was anger in his words. Five hundred years’ worth of ire.

“You mean to destroy this city so egoistically of your own accord? Strip its inhabitants of their happiness? Kill everyone else just to save one person?! Answer me... Answer me, Veltol!”

“Kill everyone else just to save one person? I didn’t expect you to say something so foolish, Hero.” Veltol lifted his head and glared back at Gram. “Don’t take me for some dullard. Isn’t it obvious? I will not only save Machina, but I will solve this city’s problems, too. That’s right. I won’t choose one over the other. I’ll take care of both.”

After all...

“...I am the Demon Lord Veltol, the one who rules over all of creation.”

He wasn't weighing one person's life against numerous others. He would take the entire scale. That's the kind of demon lord Veltol was.

That was the worst possible answer he could give the Hero, and he knew it. But he nonetheless said it, for it was the truth.

“And yet...I...have nothing now. No kingdom, no vassals, no power. I can only bow my head before my former enemy like this. I am weak.”

“Veltol...”

“So I beseech you, Hero Gram... Join me!”

He was no longer begging—that was an order. The Demon Lord gave the Hero an order.

Gram's eyes lit up at the Demon Lord's words.

“You'll...still call me the Hero?” he whispered so low it was more like he simply moved his lips. He then heaved a deep, deep sigh. “I guess I still want to stay a hero for as long as I can... All right, I accept.”

“...Thank you.”

“But don't misunderstand, Veltol. I'm not helping you. And this doesn't mean I forgive you, either. I'm only lending a hand to rescue a kidnapped woman. I have to answer the pleas of the weak and reach out when asked for salvation. And that's because I...” Gram extended his hand. “...am the Hero.”

“...I never would've thought Hero and Demon Lord would join forces like this.”

“Me neither.”

And so, Veltol took his hand.



“I found a way into the reactor's depths without going through the restricted area.”

After they formed their alliance, Veltol told Gram how to let his Familia receive Takahashi's transmissions. It wasn't long before they received a call

from her.

Takahashi was waiting on the ground far away from the reactor, as Veltol had instructed.

The way into the lower depths that she had told them about was through the dungeon of the underground cathedral of Nelldor, at the former Shinjuku Station.

The Demon Lord and the Hero were standing before the station's iron doors—the same ones Veltol crossed with Machina when he first came to the city.

The sky was already dark, only the bright aether neon illuminating the nightscape.

“Will we really get there through here?” Veltol asked Takahashi.

“According to the old IHMI data Eju had, they used this passage to transport machine parts deep underground.”

“But even so, the problem now is how we will reach our destination from here... I doubt we've got enough time to complete a full dungeon...”



“Sorry... There weren’t any accurate maps left...”

“No, it’s not your fault. You did very well, Takahashi. Haaah... Truly, I’m sorry. I think there’s something wrong with me.”

“Nah, man. That’s only normal.”

Gram awkwardly observed their conversation.

“Never would’ve imagined seeing you lose your cool like that, Veltol. Sure, time is of the essence, but don’t go around making trouble for young ladies. I guess I should’ve expected as much from you, though.”

“I can say nothing in my defense...”

Veltol felt even worse at Gram’s wry comment.

“It’s not like clearing a dungeon takes that much time in the first place,” Gram added.

“What did you just say?”

“Hmm? Oh, right. You were always on the development side of things. Of course you wouldn’t know.”

“Know what?”

“I’m the Hero, which means I’m on the completion side. And your dungeons weren’t the only ones I cleared, by the way. I’m pretty much a pro at this,” he said with a mischievous smile. *“Automap!”*

Rays of light ran through the ground as he dictated the map.

“What sort of magic did you just use?” Veltol demanded.

“This right here.” Gram held out his right hand, above which was projected a three-dimensional map in the aether. “You run mana across a labyrinth’s walls and floor to create a map of it. It’s my own original magic I developed during my adventures.”

“What?” Veltol scowled. “You were an adventurer before a hero?”

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Have you no pride as an adventurer?”

“What?!” Gram’s shoulders twitched. “Who needs pride? Better to just clear those pesky mazes as soon as possible.”

That made the Demon Lord lose his temper.

“You absolute cretin! Have you ever considered the creator’s feelings?! All that time and effort spent building passageways and placing treasure chests and monsters in the perfect spots!”

“How about you, then?! Have *you* ever considered how adventurers feel when they go through a dungeon?! We’re putting our lives on the line here, and with limited food and stamina all while keeping an eye on our party members!”

“Oh, shut it, you inconsiderate brute!”

“No, *you’re* the brute!”

They glared at each other, sparks flying, so close their noses were almost touching.

“Yeah, yeah. I can tell you guys are real pals. Let’s go already.”

Takahashi did not sound amused.

“Oh, I’m not letting that slip by, Takahashi,” said Veltol. “Pals? With this buffoon? I wouldn’t even dream of it.”

“I agree, Ms. Takahashi. That’s clearly a huge misunderstanding. We might be joining forces for now, but it’s only a matter of time until we’re trying to kill each other again.”

“And you call yourselves the Demon Lord and Hero of legend?! Shut up already!”

Takahashi clutched at her head at the sight of the two historical figures acting like a pair of scolded puppies.

“Now’s not the time to be arguing. We gotta save Machina, right?”

They regained their composure and took a step back.

“So is that map really accurate?” Veltol asked Gram.

“Of course. It can locate any trap, physical or magical. Doesn’t look like there’s many in here, though. There’s no monsters, either, so we can take the

shortest route.”

“Time is of the essence, after all. I’ll have to set aside my personal preferences for now.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

They passed through the door and entered the dungeon.

“But first—Takahashi.”

“What’s up?”

“The plan I told you about earlier—how are the preparations coming along?”

“I’m goin’ as fast as I can. Whether we can make it is all on you, though. I want you to be as fast as possible but also give me plenty of time. I’ve got lots to take care of here.”

“Understood. We will have to risk it, but you have my trust. I’m counting on you.”

“Roger that, Mister Demon Lord Sir. This is the first time I’ve done something on this scale, so I’m pretty antsy.”

“Takahashi, do you know what you always have to keep on hand when the going gets tough like this?”

“Wh-what? Where’d that come from?”

Takahashi sounded confused.

“You need an ace up your sleeve,” he replied.

They had surprisingly no problem advancing through the dungeon.

Entry into the dungeon wasn’t prohibited. There were countless other Alnaethian relics all over Shinjuku, and they also served as shelters during the City Wars.

Below the long escalators were hallways spreading like spiderwebs. Veltol and Gram followed the shortest and optimal route crossing the warped railways until they reached a tunnel. This was the path that led to the Immortal Furnace right below the aether reactor.

The tunnel was clearly in disrepair; ropes and tools were abandoned all over the place, and the only light to show the way was some old, faint aether neon.

“I’m getting more noise in the transmission. The aether concentration’s higher since you’re getting closer to the—lines—communications—getting cut—plan prep—”

They lost connection to Takahashi. The increased concentration of aether had jammed all long-distance aether communications.

They kept advancing, now relying solely on Gram’s map. Thankfully, the tunnel didn’t seem to have any bifurcations.

“I hope Machina’s all right...,” Veltol suddenly muttered despite himself.

“Veltol, you’ve gotten stronger,” Gram said.

“Ha! Ever the joker, I see. My faith is still extremely low; I’ve recouped almost nothing. I’m far, far weaker than I was five hundred years ago.”

“No, that wasn’t a joke.” Gram shook his head. “I’ve met you in person just a few times, and we’ve only spent a little while together, so obviously I don’t know everything about you. But I doubt that, hundreds of years ago, you would’ve come to me begging for help simply because one of your vassals got kidnapped.”

“...” Veltol tacitly agreed.

“Back then, you were far more ruthless, crueler...weaker.”

“Weaker? Ridiculous. Surely I’m weaker now.”

“No, you’re just different. Perhaps I wouldn’t be able to defeat you if you fought me now, even if I were as strong as I was back then.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I think you ought to look for the answer yourself. Actually, I’ll bet you already have it. Anyway, we’re gonna reach the end of the tunnel pretty soon...but it looks like we’ll have to put in some work first.”

Before them, at the end of the tunnel was one guard: a woman in a suit, Marcus’s secretary—Kinohara.

Behind her was the elevator used for transporting materials to the Immortal Furnace. The lift was already down, leaving the shaft empty.

“Oh my, you really came.”

Kinohara looked surprised.

She held her katana, Dragon Blade: Chidori, inside its black scabbard.

“Lord Marcus stationed me here to keep you from passing through, Veltol, but I didn’t think you would really come. And that you’d bring a friend, no less.”

Kinohara looked closely at Gram. “Could you be...the Hero Gram?”

“You know about me? I’m honored.”

“You were in the database. The unaging Hero achieved many accolades during the second City War. Hmm...so the Hero has joined the Demon Lord. Interesting.”

Gram stepped in front of Veltol without bothering to reply to Kinohara. “I’ll take care of her. No need to worry about me, Veltol. My golden days may be long gone, but I’m still quite capable.”

“You fool. Why would I worry about you? Of course you’ll win.”

The Hero grabbed his sword without looking back.

“But be careful, Gram. That woman is likely as skilled as Zenol was.”

Veltol remembered his first encounter with Kinohara. Although he wasn’t in top shape, she was able to slash so fast he could barely see her movements.

However, Gram smiled in amusement at his warning. “Huh. So nothing special, then?”

His smug tone brought a grimace to Kinohara’s face. “What did you just say?”

“I defeated the Duke of the Karmic Sword, Zenol, in a duel. If you’re as strong as he was, then there’s no reason for me to lose.”

“Heh, I forgot about that. True, you were the strongest swordsman in all of Alnaeth,” Veltol said to the Hero.

And he felt so incredibly reliable before Veltol. The Demon Lord not only respected him as an enemy he had crossed swords with—he now trusted the

Hero as a fellow comrade in arms.

“You decrepit specters of the past sure love to chitchat...!” Kinohara said. Then she disappeared.

A blue lightning strike followed. One flash, two slashing sounds. A pale silver and vivid blue glow.

Kinohara approached, and Gram repelled her two strikes, then they locked swords—all of which occurred in an instant.

The rusty silver sword and the blue lightning katana pushed against each other.

“Leave this to me, Veltol! You go save your friend!”

Veltol nodded and sprinted to the elevator shaft.

“You think I’ll let you go?!”

Kinohara fended Gram’s sword off and dashed to Veltol. She was quick enough to reach him in a matter of seconds, but Gram managed to catch up and stop her.

“Tsk... Get out of my way!” Kinohara clicked her tongue.

Gram turned on his right foot and cut in front of her before she could take a step farther. He brandished his sword, making Kinohara step back.

“I told him to go, and I won’t let you interfere.”

“You specter...! Your era is already over!”

“You’re right. But there’s still someone here who needs a hero.”

They had switched places. She had been blocking the Hero’s path, and now he was standing in her way and protecting Veltol.

“Swear to me, Gram! Swear to me that you’ll win—that you’ll survive!”

“I will,” the Hero replied.

“Shudder, O Heavens!”

Veltol enchanted himself with Vestum, then jumped straight into the shaft, falling to where the Immortal Furnace was located.

“So this is what it’s come to,” said Kinohara. “Very well.”

Gram noticed a change in her. She was no longer a guard but a warrior oozing cold malice.

“I simply have to kill you posthaste and return to Lord Marcus. That’s all I need to maximize our returns.”

She lowered her katana as she spoke, and her body grew limp. She was full of openings, but Gram didn’t attack. He’d sensed how incredibly strong she was from their earlier exchange. Most of all, his gut was telling him that he would die if he tried testing her any further.

“Initialize Zerobase.”

Kinohara’s body was enveloped in white light as soon as she finished speaking.

“—!”

Chills ran down the Hero’s spine. He hadn’t felt that in five hundred years. His body was moving well before his brain reacted to the familiar sensation.

The blade came swinging down.

He couldn’t react. In fact, Gram’s eyes could scarcely follow the blade’s movement.

Metal clashed against metal with a loud clang.

Gram had been blasted backward by the time he realized what he was seeing. He spun in the air and landed before finally getting a good look.

“Armor...?”

Kinohara was wearing pure-white armor.

The helm that covered her entire face had crimson dual sensors, like two big eyes. Her sub-armor covered her entire body from head to toe while her main armor was divided into sections: shoulders, chest, forearms, waist, and legs. An exhaust cloak hung from her waist.

The slim fit and no-frills appearance made the armor seem more like a suit. Its shape also brought to mind the exoskeleton of an arthropod.

And in her hands were the same katana and black scabbard.

Gram recognized this type of full-body armor, although it looked much different from what he was familiar with.

“An MG...?!”

“Correct.”

The main armor spewed white smoke as it let out excess heat and aether.

“This is the next-generation MG our company is currently developing: the prototype Zerobase. Similar to armament summoning, this MG is activated via a catalyst, allowing the user to equip it instantly.”

“A fifth-generation MG...”

“Indeed, as the most up-to-date model in use is the fourth gen. The Zerobase is smaller and more lightweight than its predecessor, and that’s not all—we enhanced its output and energy efficiency so that it’s lighter, stronger, and more durable. This model embodies true innovation that will revolutionize the industry.”

“I didn’t ask for a product pitch...”

“Granted, its one deficit is that operation time varies greatly depending on the user’s mana reserves, unlike the fourth gen. But we will fix that before long. You should feel honored; you will serve as valuable test data for this Zerobase.”

Even after the long explanation, Gram’s hands were still numb. He was unnerved; he hadn’t been able to hold himself against that first attack.

Fourth-gen MGs had never posed a real threat to Gram, but this fifth-gen Zerobase far surpassed the performance of the MGs he had fought during the City Wars.

“Your weapon, you yourself, even your Familia are all old relics of the past. Everything about you is antiquated. I, on the other hand, possess the latest machinery and training. I think that comparison speaks for itself, personally.”

“Spare me the speech. Novelty is just a single element in battle, and what decides the outcome isn’t who’s stronger or who’s weaker. It’s who wins and who loses.”

“Indeed. En garde!”

The Zerobase bounded forward.

It was faster than moments before—he had only just been able to see it the last time, but now it was so fast he could barely see its shadow.

The Zerobase had practically teleported to the spot. It was leaning forward, hips low, holding the katana in its scabbard, ready to unsheathe.

A bolt of lightning struck.

“Tsk...!”

He managed to fend it off, but before he could even start countering, the Zerobase was already in place for its next unsheathing.

How did Gram manage to defend himself against such a fast attack? Put simply: intuition. That was it. His more than five hundred years of battle experience helped him against this new foe, yet no matter how vast his well of experience was, Kinohara’s combat ability—even without the Zerobase—was more rigorous and fiercer than anything he’d seen before. He had no doubt about it: She was strong.

...Here it comes!

Gram’s thoughts and movements happened almost simultaneously. He leaned backward, and the lightning bolt scraped his nose.

Lightning truly was the best way to describe the Zerobase’s sword skills, for it was just as fast. No ordinary person would be able to evade it.

Unsheathing attacks were linear by nature. Gram was timing his actions by following the MG’s center of gravity and Kinohara’s breathing. She threw in several feints for good measure, of course, but he saw through those as well. Nonetheless, Gram still found himself at a disadvantage.

“I can’t get a single opening to attack... Technology has come so far in such a short amount of time. I’m glad I didn’t have to fight these in the City Wars.”

The Zerobase leaped.

“Haaah!”

Its blade fell straight toward Gram, but he deflected by receiving the tip with his sword.

He kicked the Zerobase in desperation and finally managed to open some distance. That kick was capable of breaking a dragon's scales, but it didn't even scratch the Zerobase.

Although the MG was facilitating Kinohara's highspeed combat, only her unsheathing was as fast as lightning—the rest of her sword strikes were erratic, yet not quite as swift.

Then why isn't she just sticking to unsheathing attacks? Can't she base her strategy around that...? There has to be a trick behind this, then.

Pure technique wasn't everything needed to perform these lightning slashes, so it was only natural to assume magic was involved.

Having to unsheathe the blade from zero was a magical limitation—a sort of ritualistic movement similar to an incantation or proclamation. In other words...

"The sword has to be completely sheathed beforehand for the magic to activate...!"

Gram didn't need to see her face to tell that Kinohara was smiling under her helm.

"Correct." Her main armor opened up to let the excess heat and aether out. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised at the veteran Hero's sagacity. This is my magic: Lightning Unsheathe. It activates under the limitation of the movements involved in full unsheathing."

A magic's performance was improved by adding limitations or specializing its technic. For example, Marcus's blood magic. By specializing the technic and limiting it to blood, he upped its power and accuracy, while lowering its cost. Expert users will customize their magic to accommodate their strengths and weaknesses.

"However," Kinohara continued, "that knowledge alone won't be enough to defeat me. My victory is irrefutable. The difference in strength with this fifth-gen MG and lightning-speed unsheathing on my side is clear as day."

The Zerobase left a scorching trail of electricity in its wake.

“Come at me!” the Hero yelled as the streak of white lightning shot straight at him, ready to take his life.



Machina woke up with a terrible headache. It felt as if her skull was filled with solid lead.

Her eyes opened to see the brown earth before her; she was lying facedown.

Her black armor and red hair disappeared when she lost consciousness and her mana was cut. Now she was back to her usual white clothes and silver hair.

“Wh-where am I...?”

“In the deep underground of Shinjuku City, right below the aether reactor.”

She didn’t expect an answer, yet a certain shrill voice replied.

Machina looked in the direction the voice came from. Pure-white hair, brown skin, red eyes, and long ears. It was the crimson suit-clad man she knew all too well.

“Marcus...!”

She tried to leap up and attack him, only to realize her arms weren’t working. Both her arms and legs were restrained with an enchanted black cloth that inhibited an immortal’s power.

Right...they got me...

Machina then remembered what had happened. Marcus and Kinohara had ambushed her and struck her down. She didn’t recall much after that; the last thing she knew, some men in black had thrown her half-unconscious into a car.

“Please, don’t look at me like that. I just want to celebrate my reunion with an old friend.”

“You filth! An old friend?! Spare me your drive! You have no right to call me that, you traitor!”

“Goodness, you’re scaring me. You see, Machina, I had my people do a bit of snooping around when Veltol returned, but I didn’t expect *you* to still be alive.”

Marcus shrugged as he toyed with her.

Machina fixed him with a murderous glare. “Where are we?! Why did you bring me here?!”

“I just told you. Right below Shinjuku’s aether reactor. They call this ritual magic facility for aether refinement the Immortal Furnace.”

“Immortal Furnace...?”

That phrase had been written on Ornared and Palmlock’s note.

“That is what we call the technic that converts immortal souls into aether. That aether produced by the Furnace is then pumped into the aether reactor and transformed into electricity and mana for Shinjuku.”

Machina looked around. She was in what appeared to be a massive cave. She would have never imagined a space big enough to hold an entire giant fortress existed directly beneath Shinjuku.

Right in the center of the cave was a giant slit from which tall pillars of light extended into metal tubes. The pillars were bright enough to illuminate the entire cave.

Machina knew right away what they were: pillars of aether so condensed they were visible to the naked eye. These pillars were being absorbed by the aether reactor. The slit they came from had to be the Immortal Furnace itself.

It’s so hot...

The aether concentration was so great it was radiating heat.

Immortals had a deeper spiritual connection to aether than other beings, hence why it felt so thick and viscous to Machina. It was as though the aether clung to her skin like glue, so thick she was having trouble breathing.

These were aether lines, akin to the planet’s veins.

Machina kept looking at the light pillars as she spoke.

“You’re using immortals’ souls...as fuel...?” She began to put all the puzzle pieces together—the immortal souls, fuel, the Furnace, the note left behind. “So you...killed Ornared and Palmlock?”

“They made excellent firewood. And they were oh so worried about each other until the very end. Their friendship—or rather, their love—was quite beautiful, I must admit. This city you’ve come to relish, its development, its peace and stability, your cozy home...all of it was built upon the corpses of good immortals like those two! Ha-ha-ha!”

“You—you bastaaaard!”

Machina was filled with white-hot hatred and wrath that once again turned her hair a fiery red.

Immortals, naturally, were undying. They didn’t experience death as their mortal counterparts did. However, once their souls became worn out, immortals decayed before reaching something of a spiritual death.

“Heh-heh-heh... Yes, your hatred is so delightful. I’ll tell you one more thing, then. Remember Zenol, Duke of the Karmic Sword? He served as the first firewood. I’ve thrown countless others of our fellows here, too.”

Zenol was the one who helped Machina escape the Immortal Hunt. She thought he had simply perished, but knowing the truth now, that would have been a much better fate. She never would have guessed he, Ornared, Palmlock, and many other immortals, too, had met such a vile end, being turned into fuel.

She thought back to Zenol’s final moments.

Take care of our king, he had told her, his body and soul injured.

“I can’t even begin to imagine the pain Lord Zenol must have felt as his body kept on burning and burning until his soul was consumed.”

“Marcus! I will kill you!”

“And what gives you the right to get so angry about it? Have you not been living in this city, using the energy they provided?”

“So you plan on feeding me to the fire, too?”

“Yes. It’s time for you to give back to Shinjuku. Only a few select members of IHMI know about the Furnace’s existence. You see, the people had grown meek after the wars, so we couldn’t convince them or even make this public, lest they’d start yapping about the immortals’ rights or whatever. I’ve been taking

matters into my own hands to keep it confidential. We're almost out of firewood now, so I'm very grateful we managed to find you. We can't have Shinjuku's heart stopping, can we? Fortunately, as one of the Six Dark Peers, the energy you provide should be enough to last us while we find another source."

"..."

"Now then...we've talked for too long. The Immortal Furnace is ready. I only have to throw you in there, and it will automatically burn your soul into nourishment for this city. Perhaps you'll show me a flame greater than those before you, little ignia..."

Marcus cackled as he reached out to grab her.

"I will rid this world of all its immortals and become the true Demon Lord!"

More than despair, she felt regret; more than regret, she felt wrath. Machina wasn't afraid of decay. She had heard an immortal's long life span meant they felt even greater fear when they realized their decay was close at hand, yet she didn't feel a speck of dread.

Her sole regret was leaving her king behind.

Lord Veltol...

She prayed for her lord's safety. She didn't believe in a god, however—who was she praying to?

She wondered about trifling matters: Would he be able to feed himself? Do the laundry? Their reunion had been so brief, but so joyful nonetheless.

I loved you...

Her love for her king was not that of a vassal—somewhere down the line it had changed to the love of a single woman.

Then, as if to answer her thoughts...

...there came a gust of black wind.

She'd seen this somewhere before.

It was the beginning of it all. A memory still vivid in her mind.

She felt déjà vu as the wind spoke:

“You have a bad habit of giving up too soon.”

It was her king’s voice.

“Bloodshield!”

Marcus’s arm, reaching out for her, now moved away, deploying a blood barrier before them.

A black blade clashed with the shield of hardened aether blood, easily smashing through it like a cookie. The blade cut Marcus’s extended hand at the wrist, and immediately thrust toward his throat, but the trajectory aiming for the Familia stabbed nothing. Marcus had leaped backward.

A man stood before Machina, guarding her. He had long black hair and handsome jet-black eyes. Dressed in mana armor, he was holding the black Dark Sword, Vernal, in his hand.

Tears poured out of Machina’s eyes the moment she recognized him, the man who fought against the entire world and saved hers: the Demon Lord.

“Sorry I’m late. I’m finally here to rescue you, Machina.”

“Lord Veltol...!”

The Demon Lord tried comforting her with his gentle gaze as he said, “Wait just a little longer. Don’t worry; my body is starting to move how I want it to. I will get you out of here.”

Veltol’s dark eyes then burned with ire as he glared at his enemy.

“Marcus.”

His voice was cold, unlike the tone he used with Machina.

Marcus’s cut hand had already regenerated.

“Oh, so you’ve recovered a bit more of your strength. Ah yes, I watched your livestreams, too. You are quite the influencer. You must’ve had fun getting all that attention, huh? How nice to spend your days playing games. I wish I had it that easy.”

“Will you apologize for harming my vassal or not?”

“No, I won’t.”

“Or for sacrificing the rest of the Six Dark Peers and other immortals?”

“I don’t intend to.”

“One last question, then. Will you serve me once again?”

“No.”

“Fine. Then die.”

Having nothing else to say, Veltol once again rushed forward like a black wind.

“Bloodsword!”

The aether around Marcus turned to blood, then hardened with mana into the shape of swords.

Bloodsword at full power, optimized thanks to the Familia, was far stronger, faster, and greater in number than five hundred years before. He could now create fifty blades.

They made a beeline straight for Veltol.

“Haaah!”

He parried all of them with a swing of the Dark Sword, Vernal. The bloodswords shattered in midair.

“Blood Bomb!”

Countless drops of coagulated blood exploded upon Marcus’s proclamation, sending smoke everywhere.

Veltol instantly appeared from the smoke. He was dirty but not injured.

He approached Marcus and swung the Dark Sword.

Marcus responded by receiving the blow with a fortified bloodsword. The red blade and black blade clashed, fending each other off with the impact of their mana.

They locked swords so close their faces were practically colliding. The Demon Lord and the Duke of the Bloody Arts vied for power.

“Oh! Strengthening magic, of course! I can’t cancel out any magic you’ve already activated! Considering the logical strength of your technic, dispelling it

would be quite the feat!”

Magic was sometimes compared with archery. Nocking an arrow, drawing the bowstring tight, and aiming was much like the steps needed for magic activation, with the arrow being the magic itself. Destroying the bow after the arrow had already been loosed would have no effect on the arrow. In other words: Canceling already activated magic was not possible.

“You betrayed the immortals! Your slight against us is far too heavy a crime!”

“And who will judge me for that crime?!”

“Me, of course!”

“You think you have the right?!”

“I do! I am the Demon Lord!”

“Your era is long gone, Veltol! It’s time I put you out of your misery, you fossil of a demon lord!”

“Don’t flatter yourself, you peasant!”

They spoke with their blades as they yelled.

“Hya!”

Veltol’s bursting power cut Marcus’s body, bloodsword and all, straight through his shoulder. He then aimed at his throat.

Marcus swung his shield arm to change the trajectory of Veltol’s sword. However, he couldn’t stop all of its momentum, and it managed to pierce through his chin and shatter his glasses.

Marcus was still moving even with his head destroyed. He kicked Veltol’s torso, but the Demon Lord evaded by taking a step back.

“Hmph! You’re a ruthless one...”

Marcus’s head started regenerating. His flesh, muscles, nerves, bones, blood—everything reappeared in threads as if his head were sewing itself back together.

The moment the regeneration finished, the pieces of flesh around him turned to dust and vanished.

“It seems no normal attack will be enough to end this,” Veltol grumbled.

The priority in battle between immortals was restraining the foe. Fighting to the death solved nothing.

“Of course you would aim for my Familia!”

It was Marcus’s only weak point. Once destroyed, he would be unable to use constructless and expansionless magic, leaving Veltol at an overwhelming advantage with his own chantless technique. Marcus knew as much, hence why he didn’t care about receiving any other attack so long as he defended his neck.

“You won’t make it, no matter how many times you try!”

“Don’t think it will go like last time!”

“Oh, but it will! You cannot defeat me without a Familia!”

Although Marcus was fine getting injured as long as his Familia remained untouched, the same couldn’t be said for Veltol. One hit wouldn’t be enough to defeat him, but due to his slow regeneration, spells like Marcus’s Blood Bomb could easily incapacitate or restrain him. He wouldn’t be able to save Machina then and could even end up being fed to the Immortal Furnace himself.

Marcus merely needed to block Veltol’s magic with his Familia Advance and draw a single drop of blood. He had a huge advantage.

And that was where the Duke of the Bloody Arts’s true strength lay. He could freely control anyone’s blood when it came into contact with airborne aether. Whether his foe was mortal or immortal, the slightest bloodshed meant Marcus’s victory. His magic’s real value shone the most in battle against multiple enemies.

But even then, Marcus had to go through all the steps until incantation five hundred years before. An immortal’s wounds would regenerate and their blood would vanish before he could activate his magic. Now that the invention of the Familia had accelerated magical warfare, Marcus was at the top of the Six Dark Peers.

“You simply cannot defeat me. Let me show you proof.” His freshly regenerated mouth shaped a sneer. “*Blood Bomb!*”

The proclamation provoked a small explosion at Veltol's right index fingertip.

“—?!”

Shit.

By the time Veltol thought that, it was already too late.

Marcus didn't detonate Veltol's blood; Veltol wasn't wounded. Instead, Marcus had blown a drop of his own blood to Veltol's fingertip and turned it into a bomb.

Blood Bomb's power depended on the amount of blood in the airborne aether. The explosion hadn't been especially large—only enough to peel his nail off. But that was all Marcus needed. The blood coming out of his foe's fingertip became a further source.

“Gya-ha!” The vampire cackled. *“Blood Bomb!”*

The wound at Veltol's fingertip exploded, blowing off his entire finger.

“Urgh...!”

“Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! *Blood Bomb!*”

The following explosion blew his entire hand up to the wrist.

“Argh!”

“Blood Bomb!”

The blood from his wrist then blew his forearm off. Veltol was now covered in blood splatter.

“Lord Veltol!” Machina cried.

“Bloodburst!”

The explosion's flames engulfed him.



Why can't I defeat him...?!

Kinohara was getting annoyed at being unable to deal the final blow to Gram.

The man was strong, she had to admit. He had good judgment, analysis, and reaction skills—he excelled at everything.

Unlike Veltol, he did have a Familia, albeit an older, mass-produced model, and he was taking full advantage of it.

Kinohara had been trying to hack Gram's Familia at every chance she got, but even without the extra security measures in place, his logic barrier was extremely solid—in fact, it was trying to use its Black ICE to fry her Familia.

A Black ICE was a type of firewall based on ancient Alnaethian sorcery, specifically black magic known as countercurses. This firewall was a counterprogram—more aggressive than a logic barrier, which merely blocked malicious attacks from the aethernet.

If one's Familia got hacked and their Black ICE kicked in, worst-case scenario saw the hacker's own brain fried through their Familia's artificial nerves, killing them.

I can't hack him.

Kinohara concluded her foe was knowledgeable in aetherhack warfare as well.

However, she was still sure she could defeat him.

Kinohara was an orphan, taken in by IHMI when she was young and raised in its elite personnel training facilities. There, she excelled at not only combat but everything else, drawing Marcus's attention and getting appointed as his secretary at the tender age of sixteen. She'd also worked as a spy, a combatant, and a tester for new MGs—Marcus trusted her in many fields.

"I received the most cutting-edge combat training. Marcus chose me above everyone else. I can't possibly lose to this decrepit old-timer!"

There was no doubt that Kinohara was keeping the lead at all times.

Quantitatively speaking, an MG-equipped Kinohara's stats versus Gram's stats was like comparing a dragon to an ordinary human.

And yet, she couldn't overcome him; she couldn't deal effective damage.

All her attacks were received, repelled, avoided, fended off.

"Earth Glaive!" Gram dictated a maginom.

The dungeon's ground took the shape of many sharp spears, shooting up from Kinohara's feet.

"Is this all you've got?!" she taunted.

The magic was so weak it couldn't damage her sub-armor, let alone her main armor, but there was no reason to let it hit her. With a swing of her katana, Kinohara cut through the mana-fortified spears.

"Frostnova!" Gram immediately followed with a subzero gale.

The temperature instantly plummeted, the airborne moisture freezing into tiny, sparkling ice crystals.

"You think cold will work against a Zerobase?!"

It had no effect on the MG, which was built to resist subzero temperatures.

"No, of course I don't," Gram replied calmly.

"?!"

That was when it finally hit Kinohara.

Gram had momentarily restrained her by transforming the ground into spears with Earth Glaive, then freezing it with Frostnova.

Her Zerobase was powerful enough to break free, no question, but that combo attack had nonetheless managed to stop it for a millisecond.

"Haaaah!"

Gram gripped his sword tight and leaped all the way to her. He spun as he was quickly falling to strike, and the Zerobase was not in a stable position to receive it.

"Urgh...!"

Even the Zerobase couldn't make up for being off balance.

Gram extended his left arm, and Kinohara was unable to react.

"Fireball!"

An elemental reaction caused the aether in Gram's palm to heat up before concentrating in one point and taking the shape of a ball.

“Wha—?”

The compressed flames burst at point-blank range.

Fireball wasn't typically an impressive attack, but in the Hero Gram's hands, it was potentially lethal. His Fireball was hot enough to melt iron and burn a dragon's scales—though small, it blazed like the sun.

The explosion sent the Zerobase crashing into the wall.

“You...pesky old...!”

And still, it received barely any damage. The armor was sooty and smoking, but nothing more. The shock absorbers kept Kinohara's brain protected, too.

Not even the Hero's magic was enough to damage the Zerobase.

“Wow, that's some sturdy armor you've got... But my tactics are working.”

“Huh?”

“I was imitating a darkling I fought five hundred years ago. Guess it works even against someone with the most cutting-edge combat training.”

“You insolent fool...!”

Kinohara was physically unharmed, but Gram had dealt her a psychological blow.

She was in a next-gen MG and was fairly confident in her skills, yet she couldn't defeat the decrepit Hero. Kinohara was frustrated. She was losing her cool, and that in turn was affecting the battle.

Gram had switched from sword attacks—his bread and butter—to magic attacks. He had found enough leeway to wield magic, and that was greater proof than anything that he was holding his own against Kinohara. That further annoyed and upset her.

“Why?!”

Kinohara held her katana high to receive Gram, then advanced and slashed down. The weight should have been enough to crush him, yet he parried it through pure technique.

“Why can't I defeat you?!”

He easily parried a direct thrust.

“You don’t get it, do you?” He sounded as though he were talking to a child throwing a tantrum. “I wouldn’t be the Hero if I lost so easily.”

“You...bastard! Go back to the grave, you mummy!”

The Zerobase approached him in position to unsheathe, although its movements lacked the brilliance and mastery of the previous attacks.

That’s what Gram was looking for. He held his sword tight to put an end to the duel. He held it up high, proudly.

“You...you think I will lose?! To that rusty sword?! Me?! Think agaaain!”

The Holy Sword, *Ixasorde*, had lost its luster. There was no trace left of its name as the Silver Sun That Never Sets.

“That’s how it looks to you?”

He lifted the corners of his mouth into a gleeful smile.

Even if the sword rusts...

“As long as there are people out there who need me—who need a hero—this sword will shine again and again!”

...the Hero’s soul will not.

“Hear my call and shine...*Ixasorde*!”

Various ancient phrases appeared and disappeared on the Holy Sword’s blade.

Dinoah Luz: Verifying Hero.

A Stra Ros Aran: Unleashing Holy Sword of Salvation.

Lez Ixasorde: Unsheathing approved.

A crack appeared on the rusty blade, from which then leaked a blinding flash.

The cracks spread, and the rust crumbled and fell.

From within appeared the shining silver blade.

The dazzling Silver Sun That Never Sets—*Ixasorde*.

The Holy Sword answered the Hero's call and regained the form it had when it defeated the Demon Lord.

"Listen well, white lightning! Burn this great strike that bested the Demon Lord into your memory! This is the shine of the Silver Sun That Never Sets!"

"Don't think you're better than meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

The Zerobase unleashed an electrifying sword strike—Lightning Unsheathe.

The Hero's Holy Sword unleashed its silver glimmer.

The lightning ran through the earth and clashed with the Silver Sun.

The legendary Holy Sword's special attack—Absolute Slash—made the surrounding aether gleam silver in response to the Hero's mana, the light forming a blade that cut through anything. It was the ultimate shine that had rent the invincible Demon Lord's soul.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

The slash of the Hero's silver sword had turned into a beam of light that pierced the air, tore through the aether, and sliced the lightning—defeating the pure-white armor.

The duel was over.

The diagonal slash had broken through the many layers of armor, causing it to smoke. It had even reached Kinohara's skin.



The massive damage forced the MG to unequip itself and switch to recovery mode, bringing Kinohara to her knees.

“Why...did I lose...to you?” she asked between coughs, lying facedown on the ground.

Gram’s breathing was heavy, but he didn’t appear completely fatigued. His silver sword was no longer shining, its color once again dull.

Kinohara then admitted utter defeat. She was heavily injured and couldn’t stand up, although she had no fatal wounds.

“Ixa’s as finicky as ever. It let me unleash it after all these years but only managed a single attack. Still...I’m impressed the MG could withstand that hit. It wasn’t as powerful as the one that destroyed the Demon Lord long ago, but still.”

“Huh...?” Kinohara was stunned. “You can unleash an even stronger attack?”

Gram replied with a smile. He then stabbed the sword into the ground and sat down beside her.

“Shouldn’t you be asking why I won instead of why you lost?”

“They’re the same thing... So why did you win?”

“Experience.”

“Preposterous...”

“No, really. You can’t overestimate five hundred years of experience.”

Indeed, that was the reason behind Gram’s strength and his victory.

“Man, it sure has been ages since I last did something heroic...,” he muttered while gazing into the distance.

“Shouldn’t you...be going to where Lord Marcus is?”

“Nah, Veltol will be fine.”

“He can’t win,” she warned, her voice thin. “Lord Marcus is strong, far stronger than me. And without a Familia, the Demon Lord doesn’t stand a fighting chance. He can’t defeat even me.”

“Ah-ha-ha! That’s ridiculous. And here I thought you were so clever.”

“...What are you laughing about?”

“Do you think he’s going in without a plan? Because if so, you’re seriously underestimating him. Oh, right—I’m the only one who knows about the ace up his sleeve.”

“Ace...? What does that mean?”

“Even Marcus probably doesn’t know about it. Veltol is strong. Take it from me, since I defeated you. The mere sight of it would make anyone despair.”

“...So...aren’t you going to kill me?”

“Me? Kill you?”

“Yes?”

“No, there’s no need. You’re in no shape to fight me at this point; killing you would be pointless. You survived against me in battle—consider that proof of your strength. My only role here is to stop anyone from getting in Veltol’s way, and that’s done. He’ll take care of the rest.”

“I...see...”

Then footsteps echoed throughout the tunnel. Not just one set, but many.

He looked in the direction of the sound and found MG reinforcements heading his way—IHMI’s security department.

“Well, guess it’s time for one more job.”

The Hero stood up.

He brandished his sword for his friend’s sake.



Marcus was an immortal vampire who had overcome his weakness to the sun. Long ago, he had reigned as king of the vampires, using his immense power to increase his following and territory and spread his tyranny as far as he could.

Until Veltol stopped him.

He infiltrated Marcus’s castle by himself, defeated all of his underlings, and

reached him effortlessly.

Your power is great, but you do not wield it properly. Serve me, vampire. I will show you how to make better use of that power.

He could still remember. He could never forget.

He feared and trembled before Veltol's power. He had to obey. But that was no longer the case—he had surpassed the Demon Lord.

"I didn't expect your end to be so anticlimactic..." Marcus muttered coldly.

Before him was the Demon Lord, reduced to a shell.

Both his arms had fallen off due to the explosion, and his wounds were carbonized, free of blood. His entire body was burned to a crisp, and his upper torso had a hole blown open. His handsome face no longer retained its former shape. It was bizarre how he was still able to stand on his legs.

Marcus was hoping the sight of the defeated Demon Lord would excite him further, but he felt only emptiness.

His first victory was inevitable. The old Demon Lord had only woken up after a five-hundred-year slumber and didn't have or even know about the Familia. Marcus basically won thanks to the element of surprise. It was a dull victory, meant only to brag about the technology he had developed.

His second victory was piffling. Even if the Demon Lord had a plan, it wouldn't be anything truly effective. There was no way for him to win with just close combat. In the end, Marcus won by a single drop of blood.

"Now, then." He looked away from the defeated Demon Lord. "Let's go, Machina. It's time for you to warm this city up for me."

The only thing he had left to do was throw Machina into the Immortal Furnace. The technic would decompose her physical body into spiritual matter, drag her pure soul into this dimension, then burn it into aether. Compared to the complex aether reactor, the Immortal Furnace was a truly primitive ritual magic, but thanks to that, it also needed no intricate maintenance.

Machina didn't speak. She simply stared at the now motionless Veltol.

"Don't worry," said Marcus. "We can't convert Veltol into aether now that

he's become a higher being, but at least we can still throw him in there to continuously die for all eternity. You'll be able to stay with him for a little while."

Marcus was CEO of IHMI and had responsibilities to attend to as such. Since he couldn't make the Immortal Furnace Project public, he couldn't leave it to other employees, either. He had already accepted this was part of his work, but every second he spent there was a waste of his time and a huge loss for IHMI. He had to go back to his actual duties as soon as possible.

He reached his hand to Machina, hoping to end things already, but she didn't even turn to look at him. She kept on staring at Veltol.

The emotion on her face wasn't despair or sadness—it was awe. Then, Marcus finally noticed the strange aura filling the surroundings.

It was intimidating, or maybe alarming, full of wrath and hatred.

"Lord...Veltol...?" said Machina.

Marcus felt chills running down his spine, and he trembled. His reaction was inexplicable, yet somehow familiar.

Although he no longer remembered it, that was the exact sensation he felt when he first met the Demon Lord.

He turned to look at the motionless Veltol, still lying on the ground just as before. Marcus had fried his nerves as much as he could without killing him and calculated it would take at least three minutes before he could move.

The Demon Lord should have been moribund, unworthy of attention.

Should have.

But his aura was causing the surrounding aether to vibrate. The air behind him seemed to be shimmering.

Cold sweat ran down Marcus's cheek. He was instinctively frightened of the corpse before him.

"Well done..." The corpse spoke. "...I commend you for driving me to the wall like this. My sincerest congratulations, Marcus. I should have known you wouldn't be so weak as to let me defeat you in this form."

His right eye was burned and crushed. His left one was dried, fractured, and burning.

“You are the second person to drive me to this point. This feat—this strength—you have achieved in the modern world is all the fruit of your labor. You should be proud of that.”

He spoke with his scorched tongue.

“I ask you once more, Marcus.” His heart started pumping again. “I am bending my convictions here to ask you for a second time. Understand that this will be the last time I ask. There won’t be a third... Do you have any intention to join me and serve me once again?”

“Wh-what are you saying? I’ve already defeated y—”

“Well? Do you or do you not? Depending on your answer, I might even overlook the chaos you have caused.”

“Stop bluffing! Your age is over! It is now my era! I will rule the world! I will be the only immortal—the true Demon Lord! I don’t need any others! Just me! I will reign supreme! I and I alone!”

“I see...”

Veltol’s heartbeat echoed—not through the air, but by vibrations in the aether.

The pulsing rumbled through the enormous cave.

“Then die, immortal.”

Veltol’s body underwent a transformation.

The flesh around his wounds bulged, regenerating at drastic speed. No—he was *evolving*.

The mana that flowed from his body was clearly different from before—immense and alien, it was as immeasurable as the night sky itself.

Shit! Marcus thought. *I don’t know what’s going on, but it’s nothing good!*

Marcus activated a spell, trying to shake off his fear of this unknown situation. He chose the spell he trusted the most: a form of blood magic he had been

using extensively since ancient times. Though its name had since changed after many upgrades, it was still the same in essence. He'd used it so many times. It was as familiar as breathing.

"Bloodsword!"

But it didn't activate.

His breath caught in his throat.

"Why...?"

The magic he excelled at wasn't activating for some reason. As if it had been canceled by someone.

"Bwa-ha!" The Demon Lord couldn't help from laughing. "Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

His cackling echoed throughout the underground.

"You should feel honored! Only the Hero Gram has seen me in this form! Despair, for your pitiful fate has brought you to witness it!"

Veltol's body warped. His bones pierced through his flesh and were then covered in further flesh, the process repeating again and again as his body gradually loomed larger.

"Behold—my second form!"



Something happened in Shinjuku that night.

Every single one of the IHMI-manufactured holodisplays in Shinjuku—on the facades of buildings, on the screens at electronics stores, in bars, in every home—turned black, then showed a funky logo of a bunny skull.

The screens turned black again before showing a single man. Then a booming voice proclaimed:

"Good evemortal! How's the pain of life treating you mortals today? It is I, the Demon Lord Veltol Velvet Velsvalt."

The man's face was so artistically crafted it attracted all gazes, and his voice so harmonious it shook the hearts of anyone who listened. He was wearing a T-

shirt with the words *Demon Lord* printed in Japanese on it as he very seriously announced his arrival.

The screens began playing videos of him. Sometimes he laughed, sometimes he screeched with fury, sometimes he trembled with excitement—it was an effusive array of emotions.

“What is that?” someone wondered aloud.

“Whoa, that’s the dude who’s been getting popular lately!”

“Oh, so this is that Veltol guy? Is it an ad or something?”

A couple exchanged commentary as they stared at the giant holodisplay on the side of a building.

“Wha—? No way! Seriously? Lord Vel? What’s he doing here? God, he’s so pretty, and that voice...”

“Wow, it’s him... The Dark Lord...”

Two elf students looked intently at the screen in a bookstore.

“Hey, that’s the guy who sucks at games.”

“Yeah, the one who dumped all his stats into his looks and voice...”

“He always gets the worst starting hands in DCCGs. He’d be much better off playing poker.”

Several dwarf salesmen attentively watched the screen in a bar.

“Wait, something’s gotta be wrong here... Damn, the video’s everywhere.”

“Who’s that? What’s going on?”

“It’s a hacking job; remember that ad that got hacked a while ago? This is on a whole other level, though. Bet it’s gonna be all over the news.”

Orc, therian, and goblin security guards stared at their surveillance monitors.

“That bastard... What’s he doing now?” An ogre with a filthy prosthetic arm looked at the screens on display at an electronics store.

Everyone in Shinjuku City stopped to watch the videos. Some laughed, some were confused, some found it suspicious, some enjoyed it, and some were

angered by it.

“It’s the Demon Lord,” someone said.

Police cars started racing through the streets, their sirens causing a racket.

Everyone watched the man on-screen and held some interest for him, either positive or negative.

This wasn’t an organized event—it was large-scale hacking, something that everyone noticed immediately.

News of the ridiculous incident spread through the aethernet, from person to person, from city to city, traveling throughout the globe. In that moment, people around the world noticed that man and felt some way about him.

None of them knew those feelings would power the Demon Lord.

Takahashi was standing on a rooftop, looking at the aether neon–illuminated nightscape of Shinjuku.

There were multiple PDAs around her, cables clumsily connected to an adapter that then plugged in to her Familia.

The lights shining in the city were a bit different from usual, since they were videos of her favorite livestreamer.

“Did I make it?”

Her job done, Takahashi lifted her sunglasses and unplugged the dongles from her Familia. Her hair swayed with the wind. It was cold outside, but she wiped off the sweat that had accumulated on her forehead.

“Ahhh, I’m pooped...”

She let out a hot, white breath.

The job was big—probably the hacking of the century.

Takahashi sat on the rooftop, letting the chilly air cool her body down. She recalled the conversation she’d had with Veltol and Gram just before arriving here.

“Takahashi, I order you to maximize faith in me,” Veltol had told her right after earning the Hero Gram’s support.

“Bwuh?” She made a strange noise, unable to comprehend the request. “Say what now?”

“Aha, I see what you’re getting at, Veltol,” said Gram.

“Indeed,” Veltol replied.

“W-wait a sec. I don’t get it. What do you mean, faith? What’re you talking about?”

“It would take too long to explain everything. Just understand that I need you to increase my popularity.”

“Hrm... And just how, exactly?”

“The method is up to you. I need all the recognition I can get. And I need you to get creative.”

“Seriously? You don’t care how I do it?”

“It’s all in your hands.”

“Like, for real, for real? ‘Cause I’m just gonna do whatever I want, y’know.”

“That’s fine. Go all out.”

“Yessir! Oh, this is gonna be a blast. You really know how to put a hacker to work, Velly.”

So she hacked all the IHMI-manufactured holodisplays, which were a majority in Shinjuku. She took advantage of the fatal flaw in the network’s security to play an archived compilation of Veltol’s livestream highlights—throughout the entire city.

This feat wouldn’t be possible in such a short time even with multiple pro aether hackers and appropriate equipment. The fact that she achieved it all singlehandedly was proof of Takahashi’s technological mastery.

That was Veltol’s plan, although she hadn’t been told what purpose it would serve. But even without an explanation, she completed her friend’s request.

“Gee, feels pretty nice going all out for a friend.” She grinned like a voyeur. “You can do it, Velly. Get Machina back to safety.”

The only thing she lamented was not being able to see the surprised faces of

the people on the streets.



A sphere of darkness enveloped the Demon Lord's body.

Soon after, it started peeling off like scales, revealing the fantastical creature inside.

He had two crooked horns jutting from his draconic skull and was holding a single-edged sword the same color of his mantle, so black it appeared to exude darkness itself—the Dark Sword. His two horns seemed to pierce the heavens, and his draconic skull's eye sockets gleamed enchanting red lights.

His thin, bony physique appeared to blend in with the shadows. His mantle looked like it was made from ripped darkness, wings spreading wide from his back.

He stood over five meters tall, and the Dark Sword itself had similarly grown in proportion.

This was the Demon Lord Veltol's second form.

"What the hell...is that...?"

Marcus gulped.

More than its bizarre shape, it was its overwhelming aura that left him flabbergasted.

"What is that form?!" he screeched, unable to contain his fear.

"You foolish peasant," the draconic skull spoke solemnly.

It was no voice, but rather something more closely approaching what in this world was known as omnidirectional aether communication.

"Have you never thought about why my Demon Castle was underground? Why it was constructed upside down? Did it never cross your mind why I could have chosen my keep and throne room to be the stage for my final battle against the Hero?"

"Wh-what do you...?"

"It was all so I could take this form. I can achieve it only by receiving a high

concentration of aether directly from the aether lines, and high levels of faith. And here you have it. Marcus, your first mistake was making this place our battleground—nay, in truth, it was that you decided not to end me once and for all the day I woke.”

A million followers weren’t enough for him to reach his second form, even while standing in the high concentration of the aether lines, which was why he ordered Takahashi to make him famous.

And she did it with perfect timing. Veltol never would have come up with this plan of getting attention to him through large-scale hacking; and he wouldn’t have been able to realize it even if he did. It was all only possible thanks to her.

Having eyes on him made people hold emotions for him, which turned into faith. That was what he was looking for.

He had to get as many people as possible to notice him and feel something for him in order to secure enough faith to achieve this second form he had shown the Hero five hundred years before.

Information traveled throughout the planet in a matter of seconds, which also meant that people would forget about you and lose interest, excitement, and faith just as quickly. However, Veltol didn’t need long-lasting faith. He simply needed just enough to strike the rebel down right there and then.

“Are you afraid, Marcus?”

The Demon Lord cackled. He mocked the weakling’s poor choices. However, no one but him would laugh at Marcus. After all, the Demon Lord in this moment was the exact incarnation of man’s primal fear.

“Very well. Fear me. Tremble. That fright will only give me more power.”

“Enough!” Marcus howled as he foamed at the mouth, swinging both arms as if to shake the sneering away. “No matter how you change your appearance, you still lost to the Hero five hundred years ago! Don’t think for a second that this form will work for you in this new era!”

“Then go ahead—try it. I will personally correct that delusion of yours.”

Marcus stood ready.

He tried to remain calm by telling himself that his magic's failure to activate earlier had to be some sort of error. Staying focused was the most basic of basics, and although machines took care of most of the processing in the modern era, magic was still affected by the user's condition.

The Familia still had an advantage. He only had to keep on doing what he was already doing.

"Bloodsword!"

He initialized his mana and dictated the maginom so the Familia would run its activation program. The quantum core started working, processed the superposition, and reverse-engineered the magic, constructless, expansionless, and chantless.

The process all happened simultaneously with the proclamation, so the magic activated immediately...but it didn't this time. Nothing happened.

The aether didn't bind, it didn't transform, it didn't create a copy of his blood with it nor coagulated it into the shape of a sword.

"Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?!"

It was absurd. Irrational. Bizarre and impossible to understand.

Marcus fell to his knees and hit the ground in frustration, tearing his hair out like a child throwing a tantrum.

"Why are you surprised? This is no different from when you canceled my magic back then."

"...Huh?"

"Marcus, remember how you told me I was two steps behind?" The Demon Lord's skull smiled. *"Well, the same goes back to you now. You are one step behind, Marcus."*

"—!"

Marcus started thinking. What he meant when he said that months before was that the Demon Lord could only use chantless magic, while the Familia was two steps ahead by using constructless and expansionless magic. In that case, there was only one thing the "one step behind" just now could mean.

“P-proclaimless magic...?” he muttered despite himself.

“Indeed,” the Demon Lord replied calmly and nonchalantly, as if it was the obvious response.

He declared he had canceled his magic without the need for a proclamation. But that wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be possible. Proclaimless magic was still a stage of magitech not yet reached even in the modern age.

Dictating the maginom was essential for defining and stabilizing the inherently unstable act that was manipulating the aether. This was an absolute rule, not upturned even by the Familia’s quantum processor.

If Veltol was telling the truth, then it might as well be an act of god, to bend such an absolute rule.

It wasn’t even possible to achieve constructless or expansionless magic without a Familia. One would have to calculate as accurately and quickly as the quantum processor on their own, and this was going even beyond what current technology was capable of.

“I was made aware once again of the abyss of magic in this new age. Aether is an omnipotent material. By freeing myself of the shackles of my body and more deeply intertwining with the aether in this second form, I’ve replicated the Familia’s operations and made possible the use of this superposition for magic on my own. Thankfully, we are not lacking in aether in this place. I no longer need words to create magic; I need only to think about it. I can cancel your magic faster than you can cast it.”

“Th-this can’t beee... You’re lying! That’s impossible! There’s no way you can do that!”

“It is all thanks to you, Marcus.”

“Huh?”

“Thanks to you developing magitech to such heights in order to overcome me, I have now reached the new peak of proclaimless magic. I must thank you. You did well working for my sake over these five hundred years. You have my praise, Marcus.”

“Y-y-you’re lying! It’s all lies! Lies! Lies! *Liiies*! You can’t possibly manage that! There’s no way you can defeat me without a Familiaaaa!”

“Want to try it? I’ll show you the truth.”

“Bloodsword!”

Marcus immediately dictated the maginom, but nothing happened. Nothing was wrong with his Familia. It only showed a message in his VRD telling him it had been canceled.

*“Bloodsword! Bloodsword! Bloodsword! Bloodsword! Bloodsword!
Bloodsword! Bloodsword! Bloodsword! Bloodsword! Bloodsword! Bloodsword!
Bloodsword!”*

Nothing happened. His screams echoed in vain.

“Whyyyyyyyy?! Howwwwwww?! I surpassed you! I am far too great to kneel before you! I am the real Demon Lord! I hated you! I envied you! But I put it all on this project for the past five hundred years to become the true king! And now you! *Youuuuuuuuuuuuu!*”

“Oh my... You opposed me for such a petty reason?”

“Petty?! You call me petty?! Do you have any idea what I’ve been doing these five hundreee—?”

Marcus’s jaw was blown off.

“I’m tired of hearing your whiny voice. Be silent for a moment.”

Veltol had done it without a proclamation.

A gust of wind followed, tearing apart Marcus’s suit and body. His suit was made of aether, and as such was considered as part of him, so it regenerated automatically alongside his body.

Then, a black haze buzzing like a swarm of locusts enveloped his upper half, turning it to dust. He regenerated.

A pillar of fire burned his entire body. Then he regenerated.

A frigid wind froze him and shattered him. Then he regenerated.

Lightning struck him. He regenerated.

He regenerated again. And again. And again. And again. And again.

“Guh—! Ngh—!”

The Duke of the Bloody Arts didn't have time to scream, let alone counter.

The Demon Lord kept on tormenting him for what felt like an eternity. Veltol was very clearly avoiding Marcus's Familia.

He finally stopped attacking after the duke had died several hundred times.

“Proclaimless magic lacks some grace. Let us mix things up a little.”

Something appeared at Marcus's feet.

“Wha—?!”

Corpses. Countless corpses crawled from the ground, grabbing his legs.

“What did you just do?! Necromancy?!”

“They call this vision hijacking. You infiltrate your foe’s Familia and take over their field of vision. What do you think? It’s not an illusion but a fake image directly sent to your brain. Much more convincing, yes?”

“Aether hacking?! You hacked my state-of-the-art Familia Advance?! How could you even penetrate its logic barrier?! Ahhh!”

The phantom corpses pulled at his legs, and he lost balance trying to fend them off, pathetically falling over backward.

Marcus closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands, curling up on the floor.

“Stop it! Make it stop already!”

The Demon Lord laughed at the duke's pitiful struggle.

“Fantastic! Now this is fun, Marcus! Keep it up! Entertain me some more! Perhaps your comical buffoonery will even make me change my mind! Bwa-ha! Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Stop it! *Stopppp!* Please! I’m begging you! I—I will serve you once again! So please! Mercy, please!”

The Demon Lord's cackling came to an abrupt end. "I told you there would be

no third time.”

He swiftly stabbed Marcus with the Dark Sword.

“Argh...”

The Demon Lord lifted him up from the ground, still impaled with the sword, and made his way to the Immortal Furnace at the center of the cave.

He got all the way to the cliff and stopped exactly one step before the Furnace.

“What...are you...?”

He held the sword above it, letting Marcus’s body hang in the air. At his feet shone the aether pillars coming from the Immortal Furnace. The Demon Lord had only to pull him off the sword to make him fall.

“A-are you really thinking of throwing me into the Immortal Furnace?! You’re trying to turn me into firewood?! ”

“Indeed.”

“What do you gain by doing that?! ”

“If I throw you, traitor, into the Immortal Furnace, this city will have enough fuel for a while, correct? Then take the loss with grace. It is your duty as leader to provide for this city. This Furnace does offer some good use, after all. It would be a shame to destroy it.”

“You’re no different from me, feeding a fellow immortal to the fire! Does it not bother you, committing such a heinous act?! And you call yourself a king?! I beg you reconsider!”

“Oh, you call me heinous?”

“Y-yes!”

“You fool. Have the centuries made you go senile? I am the most foul agent of darkness. The Demon Lord Veltol. Of course I commit heinous crimes.”

His icy words were utterly merciless.

Marcus looked at the Immortal Furnace below him. The swirling light made him hallucinate the corpses of all the people he’d sent to suffer as firewood.

“This can’t be happening to me! It’s not fair! You know nothing about this world! You don’t know the truth behind why things are the way they are now! I had no choice but to do this!”

The overwhelming power disparity turned to fear, and Marcus became frantic as he waved his arms to get a drop of his blood on the Demon Lord’s head.

“Diiiiiiiiiiiiiiii! *Bloodburst!*”

The spell activated, and flames enveloped the Demon Lord’s head.

“Hee! Hee-hee! Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!”

Marcus laughed, unconcerned that the explosion was close enough to burn his face, too.

“Heh! Heh-heh...heh...?”

The smoke dissipated.

“Is that all you have for your last struggle?”

The Demon Lord was unharmed.

Marcus became speechless the moment he saw the Demon Lord’s dark eyes peering from within his uninjured draconic skull.

“Eek...!”

The duke instinctively understood that the darkness he got a peek of right then was but a fragment of the Demon Lord’s bottomless abyss.

“I will take your pathetic fright as your last offering to me. I won’t forget it.”

“Stopppppppppppppp aaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Farewell.”

The Demon Lord pulled his sword out.

The blade left Marcus’s flesh, and he fell into the Immortal Furnace.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAaaahhhh...”

His body would likely decompose before it reached the bottom.

Veltol didn’t care to witness his fall.

“Good riddance, Marcus. We’ll meet again at the zenith of rebirth—Methenoel.”

Veltol then made his way to his one and only vassal.

His fantastical form crumbled away as he strode toward her until he returned to his earlier form.

“Machina.”

He kneeled and held his beloved tight.

You must have been so scared. You must have suffered so much. I’m so glad I didn’t lose you.

“Did you find my appearance frightful, Machina?”

“Yes...”

He’d asked her that same question long ago. She would never forget it even if her soul burned to ashes and decayed.



So she responded with the words she'd been too afraid to say back then.

"You were terror incarnate—perfectly fitting for a Demon Lord."

Veltol nodded with satisfaction.

I now understand why I lost that day, he thought.

He closed his eyes and remembered what the Hero once said to him.

"...Life's little glimmers, eh?"

The Demon Lord had found that in the people he cared about.

"Lord Veltol...?"

"I was able to see life's little glimmers in the immortals—in you—because I was weak. That is why I won this battle. Yes...I understand now..."

It wasn't until he put it into words that he at last realized why he won this battle and lost the one five hundred years ago.

"That's what it was all about," he said. "Machina..."

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too, Lord Veltol."

The Demon Lord felt the warmth of love shining in his arms.

EPILOGUE

A Cyberpunk Blade and Demon Lord

One man was about to leave Shinjuku City.

He hid his blond hair beneath his hood, a naked rusty blade in his hand.

It was night. The sky was unusually clear, and moonlight shone over the ancient road before him, as if to bless his travels. The time was ripe for departure.

Just as he began his new journey as a hero...

“Wait.”

...a voice from behind stopped him.

He turned around to find a woman—someone he recognized. She looked as sharp as ever, albeit a bit tired.

“Feeling any better?” he asked.

“Yes, though my injuries weren’t all that severe to begin with. I just left the hospital.”

“So why are you here?”

“Why? Thanks to you and that stupid Aethernet Overlord, the director is missing, and look where that’s put me. I had too many enemies in the company; I couldn’t stay there.”

“And?”

“I’m telling you to take responsibility for what’s happened to me!”

“Responsibility...? Look, none of that’s my fault. I’m about to leave for Akihabara or Yokohama, maybe even past the mountains to Nagoya. Not sure what I’ll do after that.”

“Well, that’s perfect, then. I’ll go with you. And you can’t refuse.”

“Sure, whatever. By the way, what’s that thing in your hand? Is that a... bunny?”

“It’s my Ishimaru plushie. Three’s a crowd, yes?”

The man let out an awkward laugh and walked off.

The woman yelled after him, and with that, they journeyed into the bitter cold.



Takahashi was in a small, dark room, surrounded by machines of all sizes. She was looking at multiple holodisplays, investigating the details of the recent incident. IHMI had been awfully quiet about it all.

Their CEO had mysteriously disappeared, and yet the company did nothing. It was as though someone had been silently waiting for Marcus to disappear; the same day Veltol defeated him, he was dismissed from his position, and a new director was immediately installed in his place.

The chaotic city had gone back to its normal everyday as if nothing had happened. No one in Shinjuku realized what had transpired in the underground.

“The new director had the entire aethernet talking, even affected IHMI stock. But the whole thing blew over in an instant. Took less than a day before my massive hacking scheme was written off as a string of random crimes. Man, people eat this stuff up way too fast.”

The commotion died down with similar swiftness. And the only ordinary person in the whole wide web who’d noticed was Takahashi.

“Someone, maybe even a group of people, might be pulling the strings behind the scenes... But why didn’t they just move to another city they’d conquered during the City Wars if there’s not enough aether lines here? I get that it’d cost money to move factories and HQ, but what did they have to lose? ...It’s also super sus that an immortal like Marcus not only led the Immortal Hunt but came up with the idea in the first place...”

Takahashi muttered to herself while chugging down her meal replacement drink.

“Yeah, right. Now I’m sounding like a conspiracy nutjob. Eh, at least things are getting interesting around here, thanks to Mister Demon Lord Sir. So that’s pretty cool.” She smirked.

The hacker then giggled like a child who’d just come up with a new prank.



In another place, in another time.

Someone took notice of the king’s awakening.

The wheel of fate, which had been stopped for five hundred years, was finally set back in motion.



Let’s talk about what happened next to Veltol and Machina.

They had something to do once the incident was over: move house. Nothing particularly exciting, but it was very much needed considering their previous home had been blown to smithereens.

They moved to the building where Eju used to live. Once they gave him a proper burial, the now empty apartment was theirs.

A normal person wouldn’t enjoy staying in a place where someone had died, but well, what was a haunted house between two immortal darklings? If anything, they’d moved there just for the cheaper rent.

Takahashi, who’d helped them land their new place, had told them: “I am *never* visiting you guys, got it?”

It was spacious and comfortable. The only problem was the annoying procedure needed to get to the thirteenth floor, but that was nothing considering they were getting a place in such a luxurious building for dirt cheap.

Veltol and Machina retraced their steps after the battle with Marcus but didn’t find Gram nor Kinohara anywhere. Veltol wanted to thank Gram, but he understood why he’d disappear without a word. He was certain he would meet him again someday.

Veltol, Machina, and Takahashi discussed what to do about the Immortal Furnace and decided, at Veltol’s suggestion, not to make it public. As Demon

Lord, he didn't object to standing on the corpses of his compatriots. In any case, the Furnace would eventually cease to function once Marcus's soul had burned up. Veltol considered this city to be part of the world he would one day conquer, and he therefore had no intention of letting it end so quickly. It would be part of his duty as Demon Lord to keep it going.

He had left his own personal throne chamber and was now on the balcony looking down at the city nightscape.

The sky was covered in thick clouds, so no stars were visible. The ground, however, seemed like the starry sky, with the buildings' aircraft warning lights, the ground vehicles' taillights, and the countless vivid aether neon signs signaling the bustling life on the surface.

"This city's not so bad after all."

His whisper dissolved into the cold air.

The surface's glittering stars were yet another result of the life burning beneath the city.

And Veltol had no regrets.

He left any remaining hint of sorrow outside and went back into his room when someone knocked at the door.

"Come in," he said.

Machina entered with her hair tied up. She was wearing an apron and had a big smile on her face, humming a song of her own creation.

"Lord Veltol! Lord Veltol!"

"What is it?"

"Would you mind having curry for dinner tonight?"

"That's fine."

"I once made curry only for it to explode, pot and all. However! Today is the day I'll make you my very own special curry! Yes...with love as the secret ingredient..."

"Sorry, I didn't catch that last part; you were mumbling... But sure, that

sounds delicious.”

“Yes, sir! I’ll give it my all!”

“You’re rather peppy today.”

“I sure am!”

“Did something good happen?”

“No, nothing special. This perfectly ordinary occasion just...has me over the moon.”

Finally reunited after five hundred years, they now felt the same way.

“Have you started making any plans?” she asked Veltol.

“Well...” He put his finger on his chin and thought about the future. “...I’d like to make some progress on my plan to take over the world, but...”

He looked to his desk. There was a game pad connected to a PDA.

“...I am the Demon Lord Veltol, after all. First I must grace the people with my glorious presence.”

AFTERWORD

Nice to meet you. My name is Daigo Murasaki.

My work *Demon Lord 2099* was awarded the thirty-third annual Fantasia Grand Prize, and the story you just read is a revised version of that manuscript.

The final product saw a hefty increase in page count from the manuscript I entered for the award. This revision process is perfectly normal, but I ended up wanting to add and modify all sorts of things, hence the end result you have in hand.

I personally get excited when I can really feel the heft of a book, so no complaints on my end.

Now, some words of gratitude.

There are a lot of people to thank for this first volume especially. I hope you don't mind.

To the illustrator, Kureta: I can't thank you enough for bringing my mess of a world to life with your beautiful illustrations. When my editor first showed me the artwork, I was unspeakably thrilled. That's when it finally hit me that we were really making something here. Thank you again.

To all the judges of the Fantasia Grand Prize: Thank you so much for awarding me such a massive honor. I'll continue working hard on this story to prove you all made the right choice.

To my editor: Thank you for everything. I'm still very new to this, and I appreciate all your help. Again, thank you.

To everyone involved in the publication of this novel: The book was only possible because of all your efforts. Thank you.

And lastly, my thanks to you, the reader, for reading my book.

Entertainment gets easier to come by with each passing day, and media

consumption is only accelerating. It's nothing short of a miracle that you chose my work from so many others.

Nothing would please me more than if this story brought you even the slightest bit of entertainment. Thank you, truly.

That's all for now. I hope to see you again soon.

Daigo Murasaki

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